



34

Staying power

From World War II drama *Europa Europa* to episodes of *The Wire* and *Treme*, Agnieszka Holland's remarkable body of work offers a masterclass in versatility. By **Isabel Stevens**

REGULARS

5 **Editorial** Totalising recall

Rushes

6 **In the Frame:** Charlie Lyne listens in to film podcasts

8 **Object Lesson:** Hannah McGill comes out of her shell

9 **The Five Key...** Euro immigration films

10 **Interview:** Trevor Johnston meets Tom Geens, director of *Couple in a Hole*

12 **Exhibition:** Ian Christie looks back at Eisenstein's 1929 visit to England

15 **Dispatches:** Mark Cousins asks what makes cinema cinematic

The Industry

16 **Development Tale:** Charles Gant on *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?*

17 **The Numbers:** Charles Gant parses the unexpected success of *Rams*

Wide Angle

50 **Profile:** Nicholas Vroman saddles up with Spanish cinema's five horsemen of the post-apocalypse

52 **Soundings:** Sam Davies finds silence can speak louder than words

53 **Primal Screen:** Bryony Dixon looks at how Shakespeare was presented on screen a century ago

55 **Festival:** John Beagles reports from Newcastle's AV Festival, which focuses on history's invisible protagonists

57 **Artists' Moving Image:** Juliet Jacques profiles Deimantas Narkevicius

III Letters

Endings

112 **Michael Brooke** on Emir Kusturica's *Underground*

FEATURES

18

Nightmare of crime

László Nemes's devastating *Son of Saul* dares to depict the 'reality beyond belief' of life inside Auschwitz-Birkenau. By **Nikolaus Wachsmann**

22

Heaven sent

After a long period away from the limelight, Belgian director Jaco Van Dormael is back on top form with *The Brand New Testament*. By **Jonathan Romney**

26

Fantastic voyages

Will virtual reality prove as exhilarating and disorienting for modern viewers as the experience of film was for early cinema audiences? By **Marisol Grandon**

30

After the goldrush

Miguel Gomes's three-part *Arabian Nights* blends documentary and fiction in a labyrinth of tales exploring Portugal's travails since the 2008 economic crisis. By **Nick Pinkerton**

38

COVER FEATURE: DEEP FOCUS

The psychological western

In the aftermath of WWII a new breed of western borrowed elements of *film noir* to present a different kind of hero – angry, alienated protagonists who reinvigorated the genre and enabled it to grapple with the concerns of the Cold War. By **Graham Fuller**. PLUS **Imogen Sara Smith** on *Johnny Guitar* and the women of the West



30

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COVER

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NEXT ISSUE

on sale 3 May

FILMS OF THE MONTH

- 60 *Dheepan*
- 62 *I Am Belfast*
- 64 *Midnight Special*
- 66 *Miles Ahead*

FILMS

- 68 *The Absent One*
- 68 *Allegiant*
- 69 *Among the Believers*
- 70 *Anguish*
- 70 *Arabian Nights: Volume One – The Restless One*
- 71 *Arabian Nights: Volume Two – The Desolate One*
- 72 *Bastille Day*
- 73 *Boulevard*
- 74 *The Brand New Testament*
- 74 *Couple in a Hole*
- 75 *Demolition*
- 76 *Desert Dancer*
- 77 *Despite the Falling Snow*
- 77 *The Divide*
- 78 *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*
- 80 *Eye in the Sky*
- 80 *Feast of Varanasi*
- 81 *God's Not Dead 2*
- 82 *The Grump*
- 82 *Heaven Knows What*
- 83 *The Last Man on the Moon*
- 84 *London Has Fallen*
- 84 *Louder than Bombs*
- 86 *The Man Who Knew Infinity*
- 87 *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*
- 87 *Mojave*
- 88 *Motley's Law*
- 89 *Nasty Baby*
- 89 *Our Little Sister*
- 90 *The Passing*
- 91 *Risen*
- 92 *Secret in Their Eyes*
- 92 *Son of Saul*
- 93 *10 Cloverfield Lane*
- 94 *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*
- 94 *Zootropolis*

HOME CINEMA

- 97 *American Horror Project, Autumn Almanac, Bande à part, Death by Hanging, The Friends of Eddie Coyle, Films by Kitano Takeshi, Michael Collins, Peter de Rome: Grandfather of Gay Porn, Pink String and Sealing Wax, Pressure Point, Shooting Stars, Something Different*
- DVD features
- 96 **Robert Hanks** sighs and snarls at Ken Russell's television arts features
- 99 **Revival: Philip Kemp** marvels at Chen Kaige's sumptuous masterpiece *Farewell My Concubine*
- 100 **Lost and Found: Ian Mantgani** finds Preston Sturges's late, underrated *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* can still raise a laugh
- TELEVISION
- 102 *The Children of Green Knowe, Copenhagen, Doomwatch*

BOOKS

- 104 **Christopher Frayling** welcomes an overdue life of pioneering art director William Cameron Menzies
- 106 **Maria Delgado** on the first history of Basque cinema
- 106 **Nick James** weighs up the virtues of living critically
- 107 **Nick Pinkerton** welcomes a lucid study of art in the age of the web
- 107 **Nelson Abbey** on a necessary reappraisal of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*



60



84



89



94

And online this month Video essays on psychological westerns and on Holocaust cinema | a podcast roundup of *FLARE* | *The Night Manager*, and more bfi.org.uk/sightandsound

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PPA abc

Editorial Nick James



TOTALISING RECALL

Way back in 2011, when 3D was the coming thing (again), I saw *Pina*, Wim Wenders's vivid tribute to the choreographer and dancer Pina Bausch, at the Berlin film festival. I had only recently seen a live performance at London's Sadler's Wells of her famously earthy interpretation of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, so I had something to compare the 3D-cinema experience with. Being there among the dancers and seeing them vanish like wraiths from the edges of the screen was thrilling.

Five years later, 3D seems to exist commercially as an expected (and expensive) extra dimension for children's films – although that may mean the generation of children enjoying them will eventually find their elders' continued preference for flat films puzzling. What's more probable, however, is that virtual reality headsets will eventually make 3D moot, because if you want a 3D experience, why would you go for half measures? Why not have 360 degrees?

Since the impact of VR is explained and discussed elsewhere in these pages by Marisol Grandon (see page 26) I'll leave its technical virtues and/or vices to her. But it's worth thinking about what we want from this technology, not only for film but for the arts in general. The coming of VR needs to be thought about in the context of another recent phenomenon: the boom in live-feed ballet, opera, plays and art exhibitions showing in cinemas. These events are counted as UK film releases: there are nine programmed just for the period covered by this issue of the magazine. They're also a damning indicator of the decline in the status of the cinema in comparison with these more traditional arts. A good illustration of this is the fact that the financial performance of Benedict Cumberbatch's live-feed *Hamlet* matched that of the film *Macbeth*, and from far fewer showings.

But let us suppose, for a moment, that we all want that *Pina* experience of enjoying a 'live' cultural production from within. And what if we want not merely to be a spear-carrier standing next to Benedict Cumberbatch performing *Hamlet* but to actually feel the dizzying thrill of being a dancer, to see through the performer's eyes as they move and spin so gracefully? Surely, then, the 'live' event will be the first going-to-the-cinema experience that will be taken over by the VR headset?

How quickly VR will make the same inroads into feature film drama is not yet clear. There are many

What if we want not merely to be a spear-carrier standing next to Benedict Cumberbatch performing Hamlet but to feel the dizzying thrill of being a dancer, to see through the performer's eyes?



other profitable uses of VR headsets for manufacturers to target. Games are the first priority, but there are also clinical uses for therapists. As James Witts outlines online in the *Observer's* 'Inner Life' series, US soldiers are already using VR headsets to treat post-traumatic stress disorder; the potential for treatment of other phobias is immense. And headset films might aid reorientation for confused people with memory loss.

Still, if VR sets are going to be in cinemas anyway (to try to keep live-feed events there) we can imagine that this might eventually be how all the arts, cinema included, are mediated. (And never mind that this would destroy the point of sitting in a darkened room together). What one then sniffs is the potential for a new kind of multi-form experiential artwork, what the German Romantics called the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a form that would fuse music, theatre, painting, sculpture and choreography. That's what Wagner hoped his operas would achieve. When cinema came along it was called the 'seventh art'; and after synchronised sound arrived, some hailed that as the true *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

That kind of totalising ambition for VR may not yet be achievable (or budgetable). In any case, there are still vertigo problems for the technology to deal with and the huge quantity of data demanded by a feature-length work might remain difficult to handle. But such a film – or 'experience' as VR directors prefer to say – would require a rethinking of visual aesthetics, of how to shoot what, where and why – the kind of problems that the filmmakers Grandon interviews are already dealing with. Immersion in difficult newsworthy realities is already a clear VR benefit – as long as the films don't become a cheap holiday in someone else's misery. The very name 'virtual reality' suggests an intrinsic relationship to realism. Yet, at the same time, any new form will want its illusionists too.

So are we really on the brink of yet another technological revolution in audiovisual narrative storytelling? Or, better yet, can we look forward to a new audiovisual form that takes us beyond storytelling to forms we can't yet imagine? Everywhere you look there are possibilities. It's a 360-degree conundrum. ●

IN THE FRAME

TALKING PICTURES

In the last decade, a thriving cinema podcast scene has taken film criticism in new directions – but not enough of them

By Charlie Lyne

Where British radio broadcasting on the subject of cinema was once limited to half-hour discussions on Radio 4's *Kaleidoscope* programme and brief review segments on Friday afternoon drivetime shows, the podcast revolution, which allows people to download an audio programme for listening later on computer, iPod or mobile phone, has opened up this immersive, delicate medium to film coverage of all shapes and sizes. And yet, faced with limitless possibilities, the brave new world of film podcasting remains dominated by a small handful of prescriptive formats.

Most pervasive is the magazine show, in which new releases are reviewed, news is duly digested and an occasional guest is lightly grilled in the house style. In **Kermode and Mayo's Film Review**, Mark Kermode's vitriol collides with Simon Mayo's studied composure, to the tune of a million monthly listeners. The pair have been honing the routine for two decades, on BBC Radio 1 and then on Radio 5 Live, and it makes more and more sense as they reach an age befitting the show's self-mocking geyosity (Kermode's disillusion at the changing shape of film culture is a running theme).

Countless other personality-driven efforts have sprung up in the last decade. Understandably, many prioritise an existing fanbase over the needs of new listeners. Kermode and Mayo's show regularly runs close to two hours, as in-jokes and call-backs jostle for space with critical content. Typically, the former wins out.

Another format not known for its concision is the film salon, in which a single film is explored in depth each episode. One of the most popular examples, **The Projection Booth**, regularly releases episodes that run longer than the films it examines. Though the attention to detail is admirable, the runtimes are hard to justify: a recent edition on the 1989 Christian Slater vehicle *Pump Up the Volume* lasted 145 minutes.

Better conceived is **The Next Picture Show**, in which American critics Scott Tobias, Keith

Phipps, Tasha Robinson and Rachel Handler discuss "a classic film and the way it shaped our thoughts on a new release". It began as a written salon for the discontinued film site *The Dissolve*; and while the group's discussions are undoubtedly livelier for being spoken aloud, there's little else to explain the project's transition into an audio medium. Indeed, the show's production is so restrained it is practically non-existent, bar the obligatory montage of movie quotes littering the opening jingle.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the best film-related podcasting has come from producers with a background in radio, rather than film. A high-water mark for film podcasting was reached in 2009 with *Blink*, a 14-minute piece on Walter Murch and the relationship between film editing and the human impulse to blink, issued by the science-themed podcast **Radiolab**. Another podcasting titan, **This American Life**, has produced numerous shows on the subject of film, which all boast a stylistic adventurousness missing from the leading lights of the film podcast circuit.

In this underwhelming context, it's no wonder that Karina Longworth's **You Must Remember This** – an episodic journey into the hidden corners of Hollywood's murky past – is frequently cited as the film world's pre-eminent podcast. Longworth's polished scripts and eclectic, human approach to film history are a welcome antidote to the all-male improv group that occupies so much of the film podcasting sphere. Still, her production style is thin by the standards of contemporary audio storytelling. Most episodes rely on a lone voice over a music bed.

Like most of the competition, Longworth's show lacks a sense that it belongs in an audio medium (it would work just as well, if not better, written down). In fact, I can only think of one example that justifies its existence as a podcast: Franklin Leonard's **Black List Table Reads** takes Hollywood's buzziest unproduced screenplays and orchestrates them with the aid of a full cast. The result is a vivid window into a little-understood aspect of the filmmaking process – the table read – that happens to be uniquely aural, transposing as it does the visual content of a film into something that demands to be deciphered by the ears alone. ☺



ON OUR
RADAR

Flatpack Film Festival

Birmingham's imaginative cinephile-friendly film frenzy celebrates its tenth anniversary this year (19-24 April). As well as new films ('Mustang', 'Arabian Nights') and re-scored classics ('Faust' and 'Vampyr'), the festival offers tours of the city's lost cinemas, an exhibition of photos taken in projection booths (right), and the chance to be blindfolded and have a film described to you by children with ear trumpets.



Frames of Representation

This new festival, at the ICA, London, from 20-27 April, is dedicated to the type of hybrid, interdisciplinary documentaries that rarely get a theatrical release. UK premieres include Roberto Minervini's *The Other Side (Louisiana)* (right) and Pietro Marcello's *Lost and Beautiful*. There's also the chance to hear Walter Murch discuss the art of documentary editing.





LISTOMANIA VIRTUAL REALITY

VR is being talked about as the next big thing – but filmmakers have been playing with the notion of computer-created reality for decades.

- 1 **World on a Wire** (1973, below)
Rainer Werner Fassbinder
- 2 **Brainstorm** (1983)
Douglas Trumbull
- 3 **The Lawnmower Man** (1992)
Brett Leonard
- 4 **Strange Days** (1995)
Kathryn Bigelow
- 5 **Open Your Eyes** (1997)
Alejandro Amenábar
- 6 **The Thirteenth Floor** (1998)
Josef Rusnak
- 7 **eXistenZ** (1999)
David Cronenberg
- 8 **The Matrix** (1999)
Lana/Larry & Lilly/Andy Wachowski
- 9 **Avalon** (2000)
Oshii Mamoru
- 10 **Inception** (2010)
Christopher Nolan



QUOTE OF THE MONTH LILLIAN GISH

'In silent film, you in the audience wrote the words we were saying. It was the universal language. If you young people have any ambition, work in silent film.'



Antonia Bird

A season dedicated to the late British filmmaker (right) runs throughout May at BFI Southbank, London. Working across TV and cinema, Bird tackled diverse subjects such as homelessness ('Safe'), cannibalism ('Ravenous') and terrorism ('The Hamburg Cell') in her genre-twisting films. Her life and work are the focus of Susan Kemp's new documentary 'Antonia Bird: From EastEnders to Hollywood', which screens as part of the season and will be aired on BBC4.



Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Sleeping and dreams regularly surface in the Thai director's lyrical films. London's Tate Modern has refurbished its cinema and is christening it with a 14-hour nocturnal screening (9-10 April) of his films, including his latest 'Cemetery of Splendour' (right) about a unit of sickly sleeping soldiers. Enticingly, the programme also includes lesser-seen shorts, trailers and advertisements.



FOWL PLAY

In film, eggs can be symbols of birth, of life curtailed, of martyrdom. Just don't expect them soft-boiled or over easy



By Hannah McGill

Many symbols of fertility and maternity become grotesque or death-inflected in Robert Eggers's *The Witch* (2015): a pecking crow

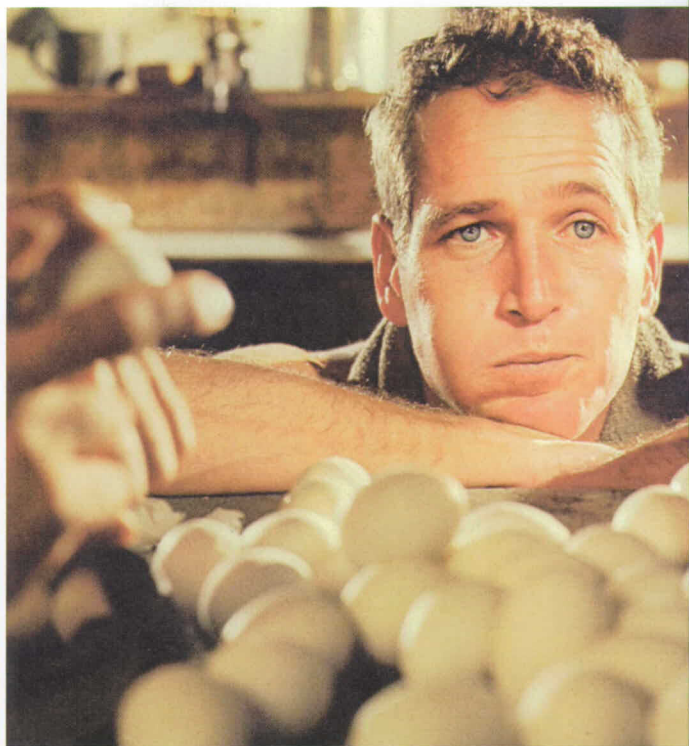
replaces a baby at a mother's breast, the udder of a nanny goat spurts blood instead of milk, and an egg cracks to reveal a dead and bloody chick within. The last image plays upon the powerful ambiguity of eggs as a symbol: at once comforting in their perfection of form and, in Julia Kristeva's famous use of the term, 'abject', because their contents are neither liquid nor solid, neither dead nor alive. Angela Carter, whose spirit infuses *The Witch*, writes in her short story 'The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter' of a monstrous patriarch who "will eat no egg that does not contain within it a nascent chick" – a notion more disgusting, somehow, than that of eating either an unfertilised egg or a fully formed chicken.

Whether in the context of a woman's fertility cycle, the Christian Easter story or farming, the egg is redolent at the same time of life beginning and of life curtailed. Long before *The Witch*, their use in cinema played upon this layering of symbolism. In *Angel Heart* (1987), the haunted Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) has "a thing about chickens"; his devilish employer Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro) makes a show of munching hard-boiled eggs while telling him that they are "the symbol of the soul". The egg-producing female body, meanwhile, is a different sort of threat to Harry: his attraction to Epiphany (Lisa Bonet) contains not only the terrible secrets of his own past, but the genetic threat of incest.

Another dangerous female body, that of Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* (1972), is associated with eggs as a symbol of denied or compromised fertility: we see Sally (Liza Minnelli) offer a raw egg to Brian (Michael York), in the form of a hangover-curing prairie oyster; later, she will choose to abort what could be his child. Sally regards a child as the death-knell for her imagined wealth and fame. As is indicated by the Hitler Youth members who feature in the film, the growth of new life is not always positive.

The disturbance promised by another out-of-control female body – that of the possessed object of desire Dana (Sigourney Weaver) – is signalled by eggs spontaneously cracking and frying themselves in *Ghostbusters* (1984). And Madonna, owner of one of the most observed, desired and debated bodies in showbusiness history, famously interacted with uncooked eggs in the 1974 student film *The Egg*, by her friend Wyn Cooper. An egg is rendered still more directly and queasily erotic when it is used as a sexual plaything in the food-fuelled *Tampopo* (1986).

Raw eggs are also the favoured diet of witch's son Caliban (Jack Birkett) in Derek Jarman's film of *The Tempest* (1979). Caliban's appetite for



Laid to waste: Paul Newman contemplates a filling dinner in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967)

raw eggs, like that of Sally Bowles, marks him as a creature at once corrupt and unnatural, and richly, disgustingly close to nature. In *Rocky* (1976), meanwhile, eating eggs as fuel provides a masculine signifier of unadulterated potential, and of comfort sacrificed to ambition.

The consumption of boiled eggs by Luke (Paul Newman) in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) belongs to a more Christ-like school of sacrificial masculinity, marking out that character's strange status as a willing martyr, an absorber of others' sins

and sufferer of their punishments. Luke works in a gang of 50 prisoners; into his fetishised body – "You wild, beautiful thing!" his fellow prisoner Dragline calls him – go 50 eggs, as if he's eating up their sins. The scene, writes critic Matt Zoller Seitz, "feels like a bizarre inversion of Jesus Christ's feeding of multitudes (which appears in all four Gospels) as well as a simultaneously self-exalting and self-punishing communion, with echoes of the traditional Easter egg hunt thrown in for good measure".



Robert De Niro in *Angel Heart* (1987)



Sigourney Weaver in *Ghostbusters* (1984)

THE FIVE KEY...

EURO IMMIGRATION FILMS

As Jacques Audiard's *Dheepan* hits UK screens, we travel in search of other key works exploring the immigrant experience in Europe

By Michael Brooke

American cinema was itself created by immigrants, and often recent ones at that. However, the cinema's immigrants don't just cross the Atlantic or the Mexican border: in a theme that has suddenly become distressingly topical, they're just as likely to have Europe in their sights. Indeed, the continuing Syrian crisis recently inspired Aki Kaurismäki to announce that he will be continuing a trilogy about immigration that began with *Le Havre* (2011), while Jacques Audiard won last year's Palme d'Or at Cannes for *Dheepan* (see review, page 60), a typically hard-hitting drama about Tamil immigrants fleeing a war zone in Sri Lanka only to find a new one in France.



2 *Flame in the Streets* (1961) Whereas Renoir was subtle and suggestive, screenwriter Ted Willis goes for the jugular: within minutes we hear white Notting Hill furniture factory employees threatening not to "take orders from a spade", and racial tension between them and potentially more able but visibly 'different' members of the *Windrush* generation escalates from there, with a hefty dollop of domestic prejudice thrown in.



4 *Pelle the Conqueror* (1987) Bille August's Palme d'Or and Oscar winner depicts mid-19th century Sweden-to-Denmark immigrant experience, vividly showing how even peoples who are culturally similar will treat each other like dirt given the excuse. Max von Sydow gives one of his most powerful performances as young Pelle's widowed, elderly, borderline unemployable father, struggling to scrape even a semblance of a living.



1 *Toni* (1935) Bookended by scenes of optimistic immigrants arriving in Provence, Jean Renoir's dark-toned masterpiece illustrates the downside of being a village outsider. Despite his knack for treating wasp stings, Italian-born Toni is too poor to be a good match for vivacious Spanish-born Josefa, and their separate loveless marriages are eventually sundered by attempted suicide and, ultimately, murder.



3 *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) From his second feature *Katzelmacher* (1969), Rainer Werner Fassbinder was the most tireless chronicler of the European immigrant experience. In his later classic *Fear Eats the Soul*, he cast his Moroccan-born lover El Hedi ben Salem as Ali, a 'guest worker' whose relationship with Brigitte Mira's lonely sixtiesomething widow unleashes a tsunami of prejudice from others: racism, xenophobia, sexism, ageism...



5 *Import Export* (2007) Immigration into Europe has been a regular theme of post-2000 cinema (*Last Resort*, *Code Unknown*, *Spare Parts*, *Macchan*, *Le Havre*), but few tackle it as confrontationally as Ulrich Seidl in this film about a Ukrainian woman and Austrian man swapping countries (for unrelated reasons) and humiliating themselves merely in order to stay alive. The graphic sexual material is particularly unflinching.

When 'Cool Hand' Luke eats the eggs it marks out his strange status as a willing martyr, an absorber of others' sins

It's not all discomfort and perversion, however. Any cook knows that eggs are good for binding things together, and that's the purpose they fulfil, beautifully, at the close of Stanley Tucci's *Big Night* (1995). The morning after a dreadful fight, and in the face of the collapse of all their dreams of success as restaurateurs, brothers Primo (Tony Shalhoub) and Secondo (Tucci) find each other together in their restaurant kitchen. In an unbroken, wordless five-minute take, and for my money one of the most touching and satisfying final scenes in cinema, Secondo prepares an omelette and divides it between himself, his brother and their waiter (Marc Anthony). It's forgiveness in the form of breakfast; and the simplicity and complexity of siblinghood celebrated through the simple, potent metaphor of eggs. 🍳

THE ODD COUPLE

Tom Geens's surreal *Couple in a Hole* sidesteps genre conventions to present a poignant, unclassifiable portrait of grief and sadness

By Trevor Johnston

It's an arresting title which somehow tells you everything and nothing. There is a couple – middle-class Scots played by Paul Higgins and Kate Dickie. And they are in a hole – in the forest in the Pyrenees, surviving on whatever they can forage and kill from their surroundings. Quite what brought them to this pretty pass, and how the thematic resonance of their situation actually plays out, you'll have to see the film to find out, but the sheer intrigue of that central image was exactly what set the Belgian-born, London-resident writer-director Tom Geens off on a six-year odyssey. What started as a scribbled jotting on a notepad ended with him bringing his debut theatrical feature to fruition after a string of highly regarded shorts, as this convention-defying modestly budgeted UK-Belgian-French co-production finally makes it to our cinema screens this April.

Trevor Johnston: That key image is very real, yet also rather surreal. Was that how you saw it?

Tom Geens: It all started with a four- or five-line description. They're in a hole in the forest, in their everyday clothes, and somehow surviving. You had the contrast between civilisation and wilderness, maybe an idea about the animal inside of us. And as the writing grew and grew into a page, then a treatment, then a script, I kept going back to that image, kept trying to keep its dynamic alive. It seemed like both a starting-point and a guide.

TJ: The result is hard to categorise, and not quite like anything else around at the moment – did that make it hard to pitch it to funders?

TG: Actually, when I was telling it to people, it was surprisingly easy to get them engaged and listening. It was only afterwards that it became a difficult and drawn-out process. We had our first development money from the BFI in 2009, and every year after that felt like, "This is going to be the year" – but it took until 2014 before we were in the Pyrenees shooting. In a way though, I'm now glad it didn't happen in 2010 or 2011, because keeping an audience involved in what's a fairly skeletal narrative is quite a tricky feat. It turned out that as we got more co-producers involved, that brought new script editors and fresh notes, and they were a brilliant help. In the end, it was like the project just needed time to mature.

TJ: What's fascinating is the way the film sidesteps the usual genre moves, but did that come with its own set of narrative conundrums?

TG: At the start, a lot of viewers are wondering whether this is some post-apocalyptic story, but we soon dispense with that idea. Some people have also picked up on it as some sort of Samuel Beckett-influenced absurdist conceit, but for me the sheer reality of the day-to-day detail in the telling rather pushes that aside. Then it begins to emerge as a story about grief or sadness, and at the same time you get the sense of almost a buddy romance between these two



Director Tom Geens

men, the Paul Higgins character and the local farmer played by Jérôme Kircher. So it plays with all these elements, and for me the impulse was to create something that above all felt organic, that felt a little bit like life itself when you're stumbling from one thing to another.

TJ: What keeps it all grounded though, is the emotional reality of the two lead performances, and this underlying sense that the real subject is man's relationship with the land...

TG: During the casting process it just became


You couldn't help but be in that imposing Pyrenean landscape and somehow not feel small, so it really cast a spell on the film

so obvious that Paul and Kate really got it, that this was all about being in the present and not about trying to get too demonstrative. It was a matter of giving the camera time to observe them in those particular surroundings, and funny enough a reference point for me was David Attenborough's wildlife documentaries. So you see how they get up with the sun and go to bed when the sun goes down, how they kill their food, and how it becomes difficult for them to readjust to civilisation. In a way we also see them creating their own religion, with the little offerings they put together, and the quilt that becomes very important to Kate. We talked a lot about how this woman needs to find another narrative to make sense of her situation and that really comes across in this devotional aspect of her performance.

TJ: Did you have much rehearsal time with Paul and Kate to create that deep, almost unspoken bond we see on screen?

TG: No, not really. The unexpected thing for me was the way the Pyrenees really stepped it up. You couldn't help but be in that amazing imposing landscape and somehow not feel small, so it really cast a spell on the film. As well as impacting in other ways, like when Paul fell and broke his leg. We waited five years to make the film, then four days into the shoot, we had to pack everything up and go home again.

TJ: Was it touch and go?

TG: Well, I have to say that my producer Zorana Figgott did an amazing job, because it was by no means a given that the insurance would pay out. But it did, and we got back to France in June – just in time for my wife to give birth to twins back in London. It was a total head-fuck basically, but maybe all that fed back into the film and gave it a dynamic it wouldn't have had if everything had run smoothly. It was a hell of a journey. 

Couple in a Hole is released in UK cinemas on 8 April and is reviewed on page 74



Lost in a forest: Paul Higgins in *Couple in a Hole*

EISENSTEIN'S ENGLAND

A three-week visit Sergei Eisenstein made to England in 1929 left an enduring imprint on the great Russian director's imagination

By Ian Christie

"Say *Potemkin* and the whole British Army will collapse like ninepins": so joked Bryher, founder of Britain's first serious film journal *Close Up* with her lover, the poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Kenneth Macpherson, in a 1928 book about the new Soviet cinema. The reputation of Sergei Eisenstein's calling-card film was causing as much fear in Western nations as it did excitement, mostly frustrated, among film enthusiasts denied the chance to see it. Imagine then the buzz and consternation that must have greeted Eisenstein's three-week visit to England late in 1929, which forms the focus of an exhibition at the Gallery for Russian Arts and Design in London.

Researching the GRAD exhibition has also shed surprising new light on Eisenstein's relationship with English politics and indeed its sexual history. It's no secret that young Sergei had a thoroughly Anglophile upbringing in early 20th-century Riga, having an English governess and reading all the key works of English children's literature as a youth. This helps to explain how he could so easily refer to Lewis Carroll and Dickens in his later essays.

But when the chance came to visit England in 1929, while he was on what would become a more than two-year absence from Soviet Russia that took him to Hollywood and eventually Mexico, how would he have felt? Very much like any tourist, I suspect, relishing the prospect of seeing the ancient monuments he already knew by repute, but also apprehensive, since Britain had broken off diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1927. Did getting permission even to enter Britain from Holland need strings pulled? We may never know.

But once he had arrived, with the founder of London's pioneering Film Society Ivor Montagu as his main contact, he was quickly plunged into the heart of Anglo-Russian conflict. Montagu's establishment connections must have helped get Eisenstein into the House of Commons on 5 November to hear a historic debate about whether Britain should re-establish relations with Soviet Russia. The following day Eisenstein wrote excitedly to his childhood friend Maksim Shtraukh that he had heard all the great political figures of the era speak: he mentions Neville Chamberlain, Ramsay MacDonald and David Lloyd George, who as Britain's leader during World War I was then perhaps the best known.

It was certainly a dramatic period in British as well as world politics, just a week after 'Black Tuesday' on Wall Street had started the collapse that would eventually throw millions out of work. Britain was only months into its second-year Labour government, propped up by an alliance with the Liberals. One of its policies was to end the diplomatic rift with Russia. The foreign secretary, Arthur Henderson, a League of Nations activist and future Nobel Peace Prize winner, put the case for resuming normal relations. What



Eisenstein with a Beefeater at the Tower of London, the only photo of his visit found in the Moscow archive

was Britain gaining, given that trade with Russia had plummeted, while other countries, especially America, were benefiting from good relations? Their manufacturers had "not been troubled by a Churchill or a Curzon" urging die-hard hostility and generating only ill will. One British industry hit particularly hard by the diplomatic rift was herring fishing – which is perhaps ironic in view of John Grierson's debut documentary about the subject, *Drifters*, soon to be premiered in the same show as Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*.

The debate was long and passionate, with a stirring speech in favour of resuming relations from Lloyd George, and the final vote around 10pm saw "these stale old hatreds which have been an electioneering asset of the Tory Party for so long" defeated by 324-199. Eisenstein must have felt relieved to be starting his visit on a tide of Anglo-Russian goodwill.

His first West End hotel proved embarrassing for a visitor without cash to tip the porters, so

Eisenstein's West End hotel proved embarrassing for a visitor without cash to tip the porters, so he moved to a more modest one

he moved to a more modest one in Bloomsbury. One of his main ambitions for the visit also proved a disappointment. Having brought a copy of his new film *The Old and the New*, he hoped that the composer Edmund Meisel, who was then working for Gaumont British, might help him give it an experimental soundtrack, using natural sounds as well as music in what would have been a very early kind of sampled track. But with the 'talkie' revolution under way, there was no interest in updating a Soviet film. Instead, Eisenstein managed finally to hear Meisel's famous music for *Potemkin*, conducted by the composer for a special Film Society screening at the Tivoli in the Strand. He was far from impressed: not only were parts of this much censored film missing, but he thought Meisel ran it too slowly, favouring his music rather than the editing rhythm, and so receiving more of the applause than he deserved.

Eisenstein was due to lecture to members of the Film Society, which he did in a room above Foyle's bookshop. The lectures hardly touched on practical filmmaking, but ranged widely over psychology and biology, artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Daumier, and writers from Zola to Stefan Zweig and James Joyce, whom he had already met in Paris. There were

celebrities who wanted to meet him, notably the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who had already seen *Potemkin* at what must have been one of many private shows and thought it "one of the very best films in existence". Otherwise, Sergei was free to explore London and nearby sights, which he did mostly in the company of the young film enthusiast Jack Isaacs, a junior lecturer in literature at King's College.

Already an avid book collector—one of the longest chapters in his memoirs is called 'Encounters with Books'—Eisenstein was keen to find titles relating to his interest in sexuality. This led him to a new book by Havelock Ellis, author of the once-notorious *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, and to opening an account at Zwemmer's bookshop on Charing Cross Road, from which he impatiently ordered the latest Sherlock Holmes studies, along with scholarly books on anthropology, art and literature.

It also led him to poke fun at the warders of the Tower of London, when he noticed that all the suits of armour had had their cod-pieces removed. And he was adding to his already considerable stock of titles by D.H. Lawrence, who continued to fascinate him despite the writer's contempt for cinema and distinctly anti-democratic views.

Eisenstein managed to read Lawrence's banned *Lady Chatterley's Lover* while crossing the Atlantic in 1930, and made at least one drawing inspired by it. This features, along with another based on the short story 'The Prussian Officer', in a short film which Mark Cousins made specially for our exhibition, which imagines Eisenstein being interviewed about his interest in Lawrence. What seems to have fascinated him was how the writer stepped beyond the boundaries of sex and reached towards "a cosmic universal confluence".

Sex for Eisenstein was never about conventional relations, and he relished the opportunities provided by his journey abroad to investigate forms of sexuality that were heavily condemned in Russia. Two examples of this emerged from the archives and are in our exhibition. One is a provocative set of drawings from 1945 entitled 'Rimbaud', which show the



Eisenstein's drawing imagining Rimbaud in London

poet emerging seductively from bed. Tantalisingly, these are also labelled 'Londres', which must refer to the scandalous elopement of Rimbaud with his fellow-poet Verlaine, when they spent several dissolute months together in Soho and Camden Town in 1873, an episode explored in Christopher Hampton's play *Total Eclipse*, filmed in 1995 by Agnieszka Holland with Leonardo DiCaprio as the young hell-raiser. But why would Eisenstein be dreaming of Rimbaud in London, when he was in Moscow in 1945 editing *Ivan the Terrible*? Might it offer some clue to the gay subtext running through the film, which must have played some part in Stalin's ban on its release?

Less enigmatic, and more overtly political, were the drawings I came across made by Eisenstein in Almaty in Kazakhstan in 1941 during the shooting of *Ivan*. These were intended for a sequence of the film, almost certainly never shot, which would have linked Ivan's Muscovy with the court of Queen Elizabeth I. We know from photographs that he screen-tested fellow



A sketch based on a D.H. Lawrence short story

director Mikhail Romm for the role of the ageing Elizabeth, but who knew that he also hoped to make a comment on Russia's links with Britain during World War II? The drawings, partly captioned in English as Eisenstein often did, imagine the court of 'Queen Bess', with the Russian ambassador paying a visit on behalf of Ivan. Behind her in one drawing a scene of debauchery is interrupted by the shadow of the approaching queen. Another shows the trade route connecting Moscow with London, picked out in a cartoon-like dotted line that recalls the Elizabethan Richard Hakluyt's *Voyages*, which also inspired the Russian episode in Virginia Woolf's time- and gender-bending fantasia *Orlando*, published the year before Eisenstein visited England (surely he couldn't have known that?). In November 1941, the Arctic convoys were bringing vital support to a beleaguered USSR after the Nazi invasion, and Eisenstein clearly hoped to remind the film's viewers of timely parallels between the Tudor era and the present.

But this, like the whole plan for an epic three-part film, was not to be. Eisenstein died at only 50 in 1948, followed five years later by Stalin, his tyrannical sponsor, with over half of *Ivan* still banned and much unfilmed. What these drawings poignantly convey is that even in distant Almaty, Eisenstein was still drawing on memories of the historic places he had visited a decade earlier during those luminous three weeks in Britain. Trinity College Cambridge, Windsor Castle, Hampton Court and even Eton had all helped shape his vision of the treacherous court in *Ivan*, filtered through the lens of memory. And they're joined by an incredible cast of characters who mingle in the "immortal memoirs" he wrote while convalescing after the shock of *Ivan* being banned. English themes and places were a permanent, and perhaps still surprising, part of Eisenstein's extraordinary imagination. **e**

i 'Unexpected Eisenstein', sponsored by Kino Klassika Foundation, runs at GRAD Gallery, London, until 30 April, with a conference on Eisenstein at London's Courtald Institute on 15-16 April



A fair cop: Eisenstein playing a policeman for the film *Every Day*, made by Film Society members in 1929

CRASH, BANG, WALLOP



'Cinematic' doesn't have to mean big and brash – it's just as much about magnifying details, controlling space and marking time



By Mark Cousins

Nick James, editor of this rag, recently tweeted that the Oscar-winning *Spotlight* isn't wholly cinematic. Others have said the same.

On Twitter, people hit back, commenting that not all movies need to be crash, bang, wallop.

Responding to tweets is a mug's game, but really? 'Cinematic' means crash, bang, wallop? Do we have to go through this again?

OK, here goes for many – let's call them the CBWs, the crash, bang, wallpoppers – cinema should have 5.1 surround sound and trailer edits: a boom on every cut. Widescreen is more cinematic, they believe, than boxier ratios. Click the 'cinema' button on stock music library websites and you get big, orchestral, Bond-y thriller music. The 'edge of your seat' is the place where CBW critics think we watch proper cinema. Cinematic, it seems, means *Sturm und Drang* – loud, wide and active.

But, of course, it ain't necessarily so. At the Oscars this year, *Room* was as cinematic as *Mad Max: Fury Road*. The latter roared along, the former hardly moved. The latter screamed, the former whispered. *Room* was profoundly cinematic because it understood point of view. Think of the filming from inside the boy's wardrobe, through its slats, or the way the skylight's always shot from the same angle, or the camera placement in the boy's escape in the rolled-up carpet, one of the most tense scenes I've

seen in a movie. And when, earlier, the mother tells her son about the outside world, the imagery becomes rigorous; each is filmed in profile.

None of this is big. All of it is small. Cinematic has often meant small things magnified so that they become larger than life, perhaps sublime: *Marnie's* yellow handbag in Hitchcock's 1964 film, the grains of sand that same year in Teshigahara Hiroshi's *Woman of the Dunes* (which has much in common with *Room*), Jeffrey looking out through the wardrobe slats in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), the lizards and ants in Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1970), etc.

OK, CBWs might say, but what about *Mad Max's* racing cars? They are the essence of cinema, aren't they? Yes, as long as we also accept into this essence the cars in Abbas Kiarostami's cinema, especially *Taste of Cherry* (1997) and *Ten* (2002). The latter is wildly cinematic, but it's just two people, in a car, talking. We hardly leave the car at all. The same goes for many other Iranian films, including Jafar Panahi's recent *Taxi Tehran* (2015). What really makes *Taste of Cherry* cinematic is the use of eyeline and reverse angles. It mostly consists of conversations between a passenger and various drivers in cars, each filmed in a single shot while Kiarostami (rather than an offscreen actor) is the interlocutor. The two people we see talking in the final film were seldom, if ever, in the same car at the same time, but reverse-angle cutting makes it seem as if they were. That's cinematic, and saying so makes us realise that *Fury Road's* thrill also came, in part, from its rigorous control of screen

direction. Unlike many action films, it didn't spray the screen with shots from unmotivated angles.

So cinematic means magnified detail and control of space. The third cinematic element is awareness of time: Sergio Leone masterfully stretches time like mozzarella when De Niro visits the mausoleum in the cemetery in *Once upon a Time in America* (1983); Eisenstein does the same on the Odessa steps in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925); Agnès Varda makes us feel her main character's two hours in *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), etc. Again, such control is as often as micro as it is macro. Again, cinematic doesn't mean big or loud.

Spotlight, a fine film which I liked a lot, does one of the cinematic three, I think. It combines music and montages of moments of action to rise above its own timeline to summarise events; then, when the music stops, it drops down into real time again. This isn't innovative, but it's a coherent and satisfying manipulation of time to tell its complex story. Where Nick James is right is that it under-uses the other cinematic properties. At no point does space play a really key role, though we discover the hierarchies of journalism by seeing, for example, the difference between those who have their own offices and those who share. And what about magnification, objects, close-ups? A close-up – such as the finger-strumming or brooch shots in Roeg's *Bad Timing* (1980), or a glance at the sweaty armpits that Tilda Swinton's character has in *Michael Clayton* (2007) – might have made the film seem more observant of the visual world, and given a bit more access to the unconscious life of the characters.

Journalism is, after all, in part about looking. But *Spotlight* gets so many pre-cinematic things right – ethics, courage, acting, the way power works in cities, etc – that the tweeters were right to defend it, even if it was for the wrong CBW reasons. ☺

For many, cinema should have 5.1 surround sound – a boom on every cut. Wide screen is more cinematic, they believe

DEVELOPMENT TALE

WHO'S GONNA LOVE ME NOW?



Finely tuned: the London Gay Men's Chorus, which became Saar Moaz's adoptive family

A small-scale, intimate documentary about one man's life grew into a years-long multinational production

By Charles Gant

In January this year, the Israeli documentary filmmakers Barak and Tomer Heymann stood on stage at the Berlin Film Festival after the world premiere of their feature *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?*, together with the film's subject Saar Moaz, his mother, father and four of his siblings. It was an improbable end to a filmmaking journey that had begun five years earlier, when Tomer Heymann first set about making a film about Saar and his estranged family. The feature was rewarded with the Panorama Audience Award at the Berlinale, before going on to acclaim at BFI Flare in London in March.

Barak Heymann explains the origins of the project: "My brother Tomer met Saar on the gay scene in Tel Aviv 20 years ago. They spent a night together, and the next morning Tomer was quite in shock to discover this wild young guy putting a kippah on his head, and telling him he has a lot of complicated issues with his religious family, and that his life is actually depressing and stressing."

Saar moved to London in the late 90s as a young man, then became entangled in the more hedonistic end of the city's gay scene after

a traumatic break-up. That period saw him contract HIV, a diagnosis that prompts the bitter question of this film's title. But the big challenge for Saar was always going to be how to break this news to his conservative family, who live in a small kibbutz community in northern Israel, where his macho father trains paratroopers.

Tomer had earlier filmed Saar for a personal documentary project that eventually became the feature *I Shot My Love* (2009), but a few days after the interview Saar insisted he destroy the footage, concerned about his family's reaction if they ever saw it. The pair connected again in 2010 when Tomer came to London to accept a prize from a Jewish human rights organisation. Now Tomer proposed to make Saar and his family the subject of a new film. As Barak recalls, "He didn't believe that his family would agree, and for us it was obvious that the only way to make this film deep enough, honest enough, interesting enough is to have all the family members participate."

The brothers began a wooing process, presenting to the Moaz clan a selection of their work—which encompasses more than 20 documentary films and series. "We were very cautious," explains Barak. "In the beginning, we were not even mentioning the word HIV or AIDS. We were very delicate and gentle. Slowly we managed to build a trust relationship with each one of them. We spent a lot of time with them, with and without cameras, and we became part of the family in many ways."

While the brothers were filming the family in Israel, they needed a partner to shoot Saar in London, and Tomer thought of Alexander Bodin Saphir, whom he'd just met through the human rights award, and who is a filmmaker, playwright and children's author. Initially the assignment was just a couple of days' filming for a pitch presentation to financiers, but Bodin Saphir was soon sucked in, eventually filming his subject for four and a half years. "I became — and Saar used to call me it all the time — his shadow," says Bodin Saphir. Tomer also visited London to shoot key sequences, including separate visits from Saar's mother and father.

The filmmakers hit a rich vein when they accompanied Saar to rehearsals and performances of the London Gay Men's Chorus, which Saar acknowledges as his adoptive family. But using this material—which works almost like punctuation in the film—meant potentially expensive music clearances. And despite the apparently small scale of the subject, the lengthy, immersive shoot meant that this was not a cheap documentary to make—the family were filmed on more than 100 occasions, for example, in their homes three hours' drive from Tel Aviv.

"This is our way of working," Barak says. "We shoot a lot. We believe if you don't spend a long time with your main characters, you do not get the essence of the emotional drama of their life, you cannot build this trust relationship, and you won't manage to be in the right place at the

THE NUMBERS RAMS

right moment. The same goes in the editing room. If you don't follow your instincts and if you don't try all different kinds of narrative, different kinds of beginning, all different kind of cinematic languages, then you won't get to the point where you feel this is the best film you could create. We can say it, because we created so many different films from the same materials."

The Heymanns secured financial support from Channel 8 in Israel, three different Israeli charitable foundations, and TV pre-sales in Germany, Sweden and Finland. But with 500 hours of footage, extensive editing throughout the filming and at the end of the process a further year in the edit room involving a tag team of three editors, additional major investment was needed. Luckily, they found it through a BFI documentary pitching session in 2013 – *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* and *A Syrian Love Story* were both selected for BFI support. The film became an official UK-Israeli co-production, with Bodin Saphir promoted to producer and co-director. Ashley Luke, a veteran in film sales and distribution, was brought on as executive producer.

The film is given cinematic shape by the profound change that happens to Saar, and especially his family, over the course of shooting. At the start, Saar's siblings talk very candidly of being scared that their brother

If you don't spend a long time with your main characters, you do not get the essence of the emotional drama of their life

might pass his HIV infection to their children. Conciliatory gestures – Saar's father suggests that the choir would be welcome to perform at the kibbutz, just as long as they drop the 'Gay' from their name – reveal deeper prejudice.

The narrative arc is completed by Saar's decision to choose his biological family over his adoptive London network when he applies for and accepts a job working in HIV and AIDS education in Israel. Bodin Saphir says, "Saar said to me at the beginning of filming: 'I know Barak keeps asking about going back to Israel, but I am not going back, so can you stop asking me.' You've got to hand it to Barak, because he saw it coming, even before the cameras were turned on. That was an amazing education, to watch this person really struggle with the decision and really grow in front of you. There's a spring in his step now, and a focus in his life."

As for the family members, says Barak, "Of course there are some parts of the film which can be a bit embarrassing, times when they were very much afraid and full of prejudice, and sometimes ignorance. The fact that they are all on stage at the Berlinale talking to the audience and answering their questions, this is the answer. The answer is that the only way to solve problems is to talk and to talk and to talk, very openly about everything. And in some ways this is the message of the film."

i *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* continues its film festival tour, including a North American premiere at AFI Docs in June



Fleeing the punters: Grímur Hákonarson's *Rams* has proved an unlikely success at the box office

By Charles Gant

As reported in this column earlier this year, 2015 proved an exceptionally disappointing year for foreign-language films at the UK box office, with no non-Bollywood title cracking £1 million, and only three – *Wild Tales*, *Force Majeure* and *Timbuktu* – managing £300,000. And on the face of it, the Icelandic comedy *Rams* seemed an unlikely candidate to buck that trend: from an unknown director, with an unfamiliar cast, a story about two elderly sheep farmers who had not spoken in 40 years. As for its status as winner of Un Certain Regard at Cannes, plenty of very well-regarded titles have achieved that feat and gone on to disappointing UK box office – *White God*, the Hungarian film about dogs revolting against humanity, was a recent example.

Debuting in early February with a relatively soft £25,600 from 20 sites, *Rams* didn't register as an instant arthouse hit. Distributor Soda's decision to release it in the awards season window, chasing a Foreign Language Film Bafta nomination that it failed to secure, was beginning to look like a foolish risk.

What happened next is a gratifying success story that is now seeing *Rams* celebrated as a standard-bearer for foreign-language film in the UK. First, it proved a strong midweek performer, as films engaging an older audience are wont to be, ending the first week with a £48,000 total. Second, independent cinemas kept faith with the film, and Soda was able to expand its footprint in weeks two and three, achieving grosses of £58,000 and £53,000, then dipping in the fourth week

to £42,000. After seven weeks, the total had reached £257,000, more than ten times the opening weekend, and with 52 bookings yet to come. Regional performance has been notably strong, from Inverness to Bristol, via Edinburgh, Manchester, Nottingham and Leicester.

Nick McKay, Soda's distribution boss, reckons that while the premise of *Rams* might seem an unlikely sell, the film's seeming peculiarity became its best selling-point. "What happens when films start to work is that possible features that make it less commercially attractive come round and work in your favour," he explains. "The point of difference can help you create that voice." Conversely, though any attempt to exploit Scandi noir cachet was clearly doomed, it's possible that the unexpected success of the crime drama *Trapped* on BBC4 created a buzz around Icelandic culture.

Cinemas' support for *Rams* might be characterised as tentative to begin with – Curzon Bloomsbury, the top performer in the first two weeks and second-best in weeks three and four, booked it for just a couple of shows a day, in a small-capacity screen. Other venues embraced it only after it was a proven hit. But Soda only has praise for its exhibition partners.

"Distributors and exhibitors alike do tend to have selective memories, and focus on the previous comparable titles that have worked," says McKay. "It was never 'Is this really going to work?' We all keep searching for and believe that we can still convert these films and deliver and reach audiences. It's that fine line between being mindful of the challenge, while not being defeatist about it."

ICELANDIC FILMS AT THE UK BOX OFFICE

Film	Year	Gross
Rams	2016	£257,475†
Jar City	2008	£140,663
101 Reykjavik	2001	£125,872
Noi Albino	2003	£115,510
The Deep	2013	£24,287

Dates relate to year of release. † gross at March 23

NIGHTMARE OF CRIME

László Nemes's extraordinary, devastating debut *'Son of Saul'* takes us straight into the Holocaust's heart of darkness, daring to depict the 'reality beyond belief' of life inside Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944 as a prisoner tries to arrange a Jewish burial for his son

By Nikolaus Wachsmann

Some time in 1944, a group of Jewish women, deported from Hungary to Auschwitz, discussed an elemental question: how could they ever describe their suffering to outsiders? Perhaps through a film, one suggested, that showed a prisoner's passage to the crematorium. Another woman agreed, proposing that the audience would have to stand to attention for hours before the screening, without warm clothes, food or drink, just like prisoners during roll call. In the end, though, the women rejected film as a possible medium. "There is no way of conveying life in the concentration camp to people," one of them concluded in her secret diary, "because the reality of Auschwitz is beyond belief."

The prisoners were right to be sceptical. Most post-war films that have tried to capture the Nazi camps have failed, often woefully: scenes 'inside' often warp the camps beyond all recognition, distorted by kitsch, naivety or voyeurism. After a spate of sado-masochistic films in the 1970s, the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi pleaded: "Please, all you cinema producers, leave the women's camps alone." The most powerful film to emerge – Claude Lanzmann's masterful *Shoah* (1985) – derived much of its impact from its principled rejection of re-enactments and historical footage. For Lanzmann, such images were "images without imagination"; instead of revealing the essence of the Holocaust, they threatened to obscure it. The reality of Auschwitz, in other words, could only be constructed in our minds, not on a soundstage.

Son of Saul, by contrast, the extraordinary debut by László Nemes, dares to depict the "implacable nakedness of the violence" (as Lanzmann called it), and does so to devastating effect. The film, which won the 2016 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, takes us straight into the Holocaust's heart of darkness: the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, where almost one million Jews were murdered. Here, the local SS delegated most of the day-to-day operation to selected prisoners, the so-called Special Squad (*Sonderkommando*), who lived and worked inside the factories of death, separated from

the rest of the camp. Almost all of them, with the exception of some Polish and German supervisors (so-called Kapos), were Jews. They were exempt from extermination, at least for now, but at the terrible price of assisting genocide: they had to lead victims to the gas, burn their bodies and scatter their remains. The Special Squad was haunted by the physical manifestations of mass murder – the pleas, the bodies, the blood – and also by a deep sense of shame, having been deprived by the SS of "even the solace of innocence", in Primo Levi's words.

The film is set in summer 1944, when the Birkenau inferno was at its fiercest and the Special Squad, some 900 men strong, worked in shifts around the clock. As the Nazis extended the Holocaust into Hungary, well over 100 deportation trains were routed to the camp in just a few weeks; on some days, as many as five trains pulled up at the ramp, packed with around 16,000 men, women and children from Hungary. The great majority of them – the old and the weak, the young and their mothers – were judged 'unfit' for slave labour and murdered within hours. The crematoria were burning longer than ever and the SS also used open-air pits to turn the mountain of bodies into ash. Such was the frenzy, the SS sometimes bypassed the gas chambers altogether, shooting Jews at the blazing pits or throwing them into the flames alive.

This, then, is the setting of *Son of Saul*. But Nemes decides against spelling out the historical detail. Instead of a lengthy exposition, he plunges the audience headfirst into the "nightmare of crime" (as one Birkenau prisoner described it in 1944). We hear sounds of moaning and barking, a sharp whistle, and after the film comes into focus we soon catch sight of Jews being hustled away from a train; they have just been forced out of the dark carriages, apparently, and into a bewildering, terrifying new world, which is filled with cries and shouts, haste and violence. At first, it is unclear what is going on, and the viewers' confusion mirrors that of the new arrivals, who do not know where they are and what their fate will be. The camera follows them into a cramped, claustrophobic underground space, where they



OUT OF THE ASHES
In *Son of Saul*, the title character's dogged, fearless quest to give his son a decent funeral gives his own life some meaning, in a place that has lost all meaning

undress as a German official promises warm food and good jobs, after a shower. Naked, they are herded into an adjacent room, leaving behind their clothes and most treasured possessions: letters, valuables, even sheets of music. Then the iron door slams shut. Wisely, Nemes does not show what happens next, after the Zyklon B is inserted, though we do hear the piercing screams and the metallic thuds, as the doomed press against the door. Later, we watch Special Squad prisoners drag the corpses out of the gas chamber. Lifts carry the dead up to the crematoria, stoked by inmates like a blazing engine of death. Down below, others clear up the clothes and wash away the blood, until everything is ready for the next transport.

All this is seen through the dark, haunting eyes of Saul Ausländer (the deeply affecting Géza Röhrig), a fictional prisoner from Hungary in his 40s. A veteran of the Special Squad, Saul has been blunted by Birkenau, his face as impassive as that of his comrades. But he is jolted out of his daze when a boy miraculously survives the gas chamber, only to be murdered by an SS man. Saul believes the child to be his son and resolves to give him a proper funeral. His desperate struggle – to save the boy from the ovens and hide his body, to find a Rabbi and bury the corpse – takes us through the “nightmare of crime”. Saul is our guide and commands almost every frame, often close up, pushing the endless scenes of horror to the edges around him.

The film makes the terror of Auschwitz tangible, revealing how the camp assaulted all the senses: there is the stench of the gas and the dead; the heat of the bodies burning in ovens and pits; the searchlights blinding new arrivals; the sound of shots and barked orders. All this is juxtaposed with jarring flashes of natural beauty, of birch forests swaying in the breeze and birds singing. Even in hell, we realise, there were traces of normality, which brought the evil into even sharper relief. As a prisoner wrote about another Nazi camp: “Sometimes when I was thinking about the loving care the Gestapo henchmen lavished on these flower beds, I thought I was going to go mad over it.”


The unrelenting pace of the camp propels *Son of Saul*, as the handheld camera hastens after its protagonist through the different circles of hell. Saul and the other inmates always hurry, with little time to think, breathe or talk. There are brief, snatched exchanges in Yiddish, Hungarian and German, revealing the complex composition of the Special Squad (prisoners came from more than a dozen countries). They speak the language of the camps – an alien mix of euphemisms, vulgarity and dark humour – and live in perpetual fear of the mighty Kapos and the even mightier SS, whom we see humiliate, abuse and kill prisoners at will.

Only rarely does the film slow down, and the brief periods of calm illuminate the distinctive status of the Special Squad: in a morbid twist of fate, it was the prisoners closest to the epicentre of the Holocaust who enjoyed the best living conditions. They helped themselves to possessions left behind by the dead, either for themselves or to bribe the SS, dressed in warm clothes and underwear, and rarely suffered hunger. Their quarters under the roof of the crematoria were furnished with the belongings of the dead, too: we see tables covered with tablecloths, washbowls and soap, and bedding on the bunks, where


What emerges most clearly is the impossibility of doing the right thing in a world gone wrong. As the Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer put it, the prisoners faced ‘choiceless choices’

prisoners hoped for fleeting moments of oblivion, before the endless cycle of death began anew.

What emerges most clearly of all is the impossibility of doing the right thing in a world gone wrong. As the Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer put it, the prisoners faced “choiceless choices”. In Saul’s case, his decision to bury the boy’s body puts his own life, and the lives of fellow prisoners, into immediate and grave danger. It also threatens the desperate efforts of other Special Squad members to stage an uprising. “We’ll die because of you,” one shouts at Saul. He replies, “We are already dead.” But Saul is not dead yet. His mission gives him a last spark, and he pursues it doggedly, fearlessly, against all odds. It is this quest for the boy’s funeral – we never learn if he really is his son, or if his mind is clouded by the suffering all around – that gives his life some meaning, in a place that has lost all meaning.

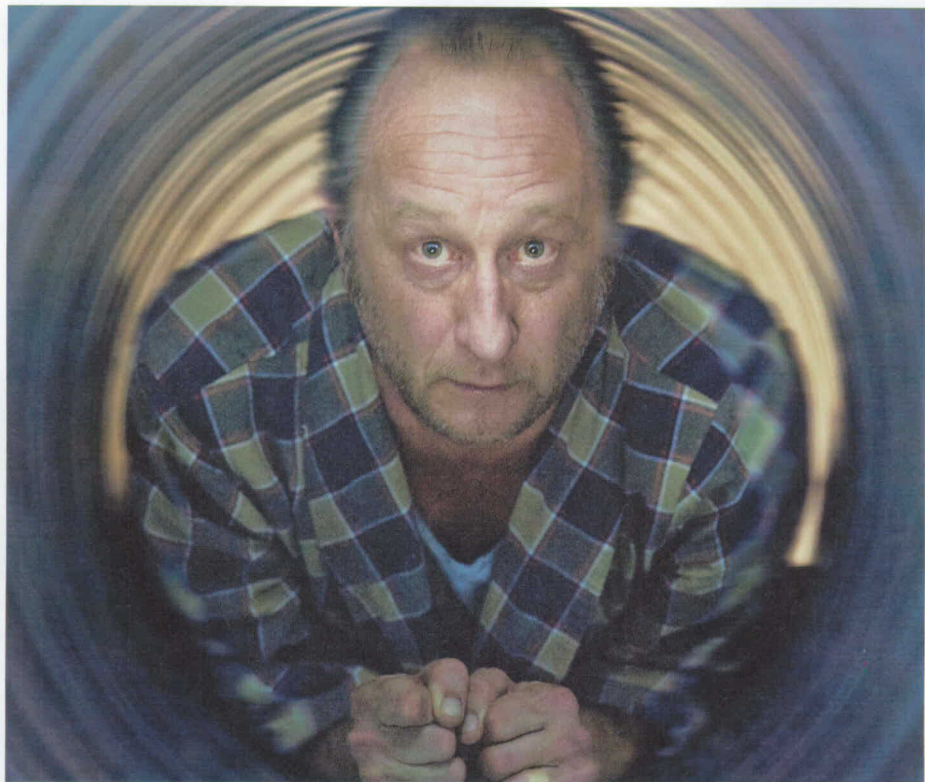
Son of Saul can offer us no more than a glimpse of the Holocaust, covering just two days in a single camp, and focusing on only one of its inmates. In summer 1944, the Auschwitz complex held well over 100,000 prisoners, and each one had their own story. And while the film’s depiction of the Special Squad is often strikingly accurate, it is not purely factual: it telescopes some real events and invents others (most importantly, the prisoners were not systematically murdered every few months, as the film suggests). And yet its unflinching gaze and its refusal to soften the audience’s encounter with the camps – by offering false hope and redemption – reveals a terrible truth: the Holocaust did not sanctify its victims, but forced them into degradation and despair, breaking their bodies and corroding their souls. “Confinement in the camp, destitution, torture and death in the gas chamber are not heroism,” three Polish survivors of Auschwitz wrote in 1946. *Son of Saul* confirms this conclusion, in a searing, almost feverish way. It is a cliché to call a work of art ‘almost unbearable’. In this case, though, it is true: the film really is almost impossible to watch. But we should bear it, we have to bear it, if we want to get closer to understanding the ‘reality beyond belief’ that was Auschwitz. 

Nikolaus Wachsmann is the author of *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*

 *Son of Saul* is released on 29 April and is reviewed on page 92

CIRCLES OF HELL
Son of Saul can offer us no more than a glimpse of the Holocaust, covering just two days in a single camp, and focusing on just one inmate, Saul Ausländer, played by Géza Röhrig (below)





HEAVEN SENT

After a long period away from the limelight following his brilliant debut *'Toto the Hero'*, Belgian director Jaco Van Dormael is back on top form with *'The Brand New Testament'*, a scabrously funny version of the biblical creation story in which a sloppy, sadistic God dreams forth Brussels and has to face down a rebellion led by his young daughter

By Jonathan Romney

Jaco Van Dormael may not be exactly a Mr Nobody – but it's tempting to imagine that, in choosing that title for his 2009 film, the Belgian director was playing knowingly on his perceived status as contemporary cinema's forgotten man. Van Dormael made a brilliant feature debut in 1991, aged 34, with *Toto the Hero*, a complex, elaborately articulated, philosophically rich fantasy with distinct echoes of Dennis Potter, about life, death, memory and the deceptive narrative shapes we impose on experience in our desperate attempts to make sense of it.

Toto was a bold statement that immediately announced Van Dormael as a name to reckon with. The film has been almost forgotten in the quarter century since it appeared – although, having just rewatched it, I'm happy to report that it still holds up very well. It's hard to imagine that its baroque imagination and matching visual style didn't leave its mark to some extent on Jean-Pierre Jeunet's flashier, much less intelligent *Amélie* (2001) – and on the likes of Wes Anderson and Michel Gondry.

If Van Dormael's reputation didn't soar in the years that followed, that was partly because his follow-up *The Eighth Day* (1996) was less flamboyant and emotionally somewhat mawkish, a buddy movie about a depressed businessman (Daniel Auteuil) and a man with Down's Syndrome (Pascal Duquenne, who has appeared in all four of Van Dormael's features). It took another 13 years for a third feature to appear, and that was a

sprawling folly – *Mr. Nobody*, a vast jigsaw construction starring Jared Leto as a universal everyman (or no-man) whose life and loves split into a multiplicity of possible parallel paths. It certainly had no shortage of ideas, although it took its romanticism a little too seriously, and didn't quite feel as if it was offering any insights that the much tighter *Toto* hadn't already gestured towards.

But *Toto* philes will be glad to hear that Van Dormael's long-awaited fourth film, *The Brand New Testament*, represents a brisk and boisterous revival of his muse – and given that his films tend to make cheerful capital from his country of origin (as in the suburban architecture of *Toto*), it's arguably his most Belgian film to date. An enthusiastically scabrous reinterpretation of Biblical theology, the film begins with God creating the world – only this deity is a malevolent, brutish slob, played by the imitably cartoon-faced Benoît Poelvoorde (the star of *Man Bites Dog*, various comedies by Benoît Delépine and Gustave de Kervern, and Benoît Jacquot's recent *3 Hearts*). And the world that He creates is... Brussels, which He at first experimentally peoples with giraffes and chickens, before introducing a naked Adam (the angular Keaton-esque mime Dominique Abel) with a black 'censored' bar comically wobbling over his loins.

Pursuing his strip-cartoon imagination to the limit, Van Dormael imagines this randy deity delighting in screwing over humanity for the sheer vicious pleasure of it. God has a wife (Yolande Moreau), who at first silently and compliantly shuffles around in the background, but finally emerges triumphant; a son, J.C., who has wisely left to follow an illustrious career of his own; and a pre-teen daughter called Ea, played by newcomer Pili Groyne. She's a born rebel who decides to take revenge on her monstrous and abusive patriarch by pulling the ultimate trick to sabotage His hold over humanity – letting people know the exact moment they are due to die.

This is the film's philosophical nub – the question of how the uncertainty of death keeps us prisoners of a feared metaphysical order. To know when we're due to expire – in the film, it's to the exact millisecond, with characters' remaining time ticking away digit by digit – would be either terrifying or utterly liberating (or both, as Van Dormael and co-writer Thomas Gunzig suggest). This knowledge would allow us to make our own decisions about how to live, as happens to the new apostles Ea gathers around her. They include a young woman whose life has been changed by the loss of an arm in childhood (Laura Verlinden); a man-next-door type (François Damiens) whose bland exterior hides a lifelong obsession with death; and a bored woman (Catherine Deneuve) who falls in love with a gorilla. For the record, Van Dormael hasn't seen Oshima Nagisa's *Max mon amour* (1986), in which Charlotte Rampling's character finds herself in this same situation; instead he was inspired by real life. "Jo Dekmine, who runs the Theatre 140 in Brussels, booked a singer who lived with a chimpanzee. Hotels wouldn't let him have the chimp in his room, so he stayed at Jo's – but the chimp couldn't stand women coming near the singer. It was insanely jealous."

Anyone fixated on stylistic moderation in movies may find *The Brand New Testament* just the sort of film to make their hair stand on end. At times, Van Dormael revels in a certain forced literalness to his visual conceits; like Gondry and Anderson, he can't resist creating an incredibly elaborate set-up just for one shot (besides, the film occasionally makes self-tweeting in-jokes about that very tendency). And, as in *Mr. Nobody*, Van Dormael doesn't always know when to stop – although this time, the



structure (Genesis, Exodus and chapters for each apostle) provides a ready-made framing system. But there's a lovely abrasiveness to the film's most trenchant humour and, at times, especially in the 'Genesis' section, the sheer grace and simplicity of the visual absurdism are quite breathtaking (a supermarket for ostriches? A cinema for chickens? Why not?). Overall, Van Dormael and his team, who include designer Sylvie Olivé and director of photography Christophe Beaucarne, have so many good ideas that you revel in the sheer energetic expansiveness of it all, even when individual elements don't quite come off.

When I spoke to Van Dormael last autumn during his visit to the London Film Festival, he explained what made *Brand New Testament* so Belgian, and why he set it in his native Brussels. "Belgian humour is basically the humour of people who laugh at themselves before everyone else can laugh at them," he says. "This film mixes northern, southern and Brussels accents. And Brussels is a city where everyone's welcome, there's no nationality there – it's a city of mixtures. That's why I like it and that's why I stay there."

In contemporary European Judeo-Christian culture, the idea of satirical blasphemy may have lost the charge it had as recently as the late 70s (remember the 1977 trial of *Gay News* over James Kirkup's poem about Jesus and a centurion). But in recent years, the idea of religious offence has taken on a nightmarish new

CRUEL INTENTIONS
In *The Brand New Testament* Benoît Poelvoorde plays God (left and top) as a vile schlub who delights in screwing over humanity, while Pili Groyne plays his unruly daughter Ea (above)

charge that a few years ago could barely have been imagined. Van Dormael's film, he says, was in the editing stage when the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks happened in Paris; and he started writing the script at a time when there were demonstrations in the French capital against gay marriage: "You'd see children carrying crosses – these really surreal images."

However, the film isn't strictly about religion, he insists. "[Philosopher Gilles] Deleuze said that there's one thing that religion and cinema have in common – they both try to persuade you that life can have a meaning. In a way, this film is made for people who think, 'OK, even if life doesn't have a meaning, it's still really cool.' The human soul builds its own prisons, and films, novels, plays can all throw those prisons open. That's why I like making films, even if they're never realistic – you can still dream about different, more varied lives." That's the role of God's rebel daughter, he says: "to stand up to God the Father and open up a whole new range of possibilities – invent a life that isn't in the catalogue."

MARKED FOR DEATH

The philosophical theme of the foreknowledge of death was already central to *Toto*, Van Dormael points out; that film was about an old man looking back over the delusions and fantasies of his life and trying to make meaning from its coincidences and missed opportunities. The idea infects Van Dormael's approach to narrative – or perhaps it's his narrative shapes that determine his films' themes. The question underpinning *Toto*, he says, is, "Does death give a meaning to what comes before? In films, yes – in life, probably not. When someone dies in a film, you think it means that everything else was heading somewhere. In life, things just end."

"What interests me most is structures – that's what gives things their meaning. Instead of a 'funnel structure', where everything converges, *Mr. Nobody* was the exact opposite, it was more like a tree. *The Brand New Testament* is more like *Don Quixote* or *Alice in Wonderland* – it's episodic. It's the present moment that's almost most important, it's not about waiting for what's going to happen. You're not thinking about where the road is going – you're on the road, and there are nice smells and some pebbles and you're eating apples."

Notwithstanding the feel of Gilliam-esque spectacle that Van Dormael and his team manage to muster, the film's illusionism revels in a certain diagrammatic simplicity. He pays tribute to designer Sylvie Olivé for work-

ing with canny economy: "She basically takes places that already exist and empties them out – keeps paring them right down until you end up with the bare essence. Here we wanted to give things a religious look, so everything is seen frontally and is always symmetrical, like in a church. Even if it's just a washing machine, it has that religious symmetrical look." The cheaper and more obvious the illusion, the better – although the film's visual style is somewhat glossier than, say, the Brechtian aesthetic of a Guy Maddin. Even so, Van Dormael relishes the cheap and the cheerful in the right place. "An aerial shot of Brussels? Too expensive – so we have a bunch of cardboard boxes and a sign saying 'Brussels'. You know it's a trick and you decide to believe in it – and that creates a sense of complicity with the viewer. Right away, it puts you in a story – 'Once upon a time' and all that."

This approach has a philosophical bottom line. "It's about creating a universe and then saying, 'It's not reality, it's not imagination – it's perception. It's about taking your perception of the universe and putting it into images. No one really knows what reality is – my dog doesn't see it the same way I do.'"

Between films, Van Dormael doesn't just mysteriously vanish into some nebulous hinterland – in recent years, he's been creating live spectacles involving film, together with his wife, dancer and choreographer Michèle Anne De Mey. They brought one to London's Barbican two years ago, and are currently planning further 'films éphémères' – 'pop-up movies', if you like, which are 'shot' live on stage for one night only, but not actually recorded. "It's like cookery – it has to be done fresh every night. It's great, it means you can do – you *have* to do – things you can't do in the theatre."

As for another film, Van Dormael is reconciled to working slowly. It's all because of the writing, he says, and the intricate structuring that he's committed to – as well as all the imagining he does before he really even gets started on a script. "There are films that take the same time to build as a house, and others that take the same time as a cathedral. And there are some cathedrals that still aren't finished."

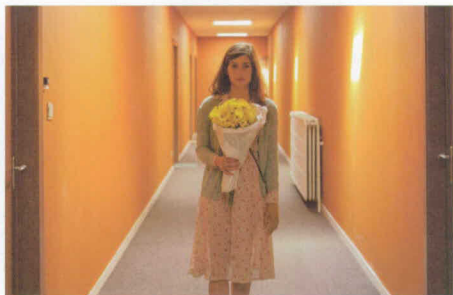
"Every image has to be dreamed – if I made hyper-realistic films, I'd have done one every two years. The moment I'm happy [with an idea] is when it starts to feel like I'm watching a scene in a film, and then everything's suddenly clear. That's when I can start writing." ☺

i *The Brand New Testament* is released in UK cinemas on 15 April and is reviewed on page 74



The human soul builds its own prisons, and films, novels, plays can all throw those prisons open. That's why I like making films – you can dream about different, more varied lives

GORILLA IN THE MIDST
In *The Brand New Testament*, directed by Jaco Van Dormael (above), God's daughter Ea gathers a group of apostles around her, including Catherine Deneuve as a woman who falls in love with a gorilla (below left) and Laura Verlinden as a woman whose life has been changed by the loss of an arm during childhood (below right)



FANTASTIC VOYAGES

HOW VR BECAME A REALITY

A brave new world of virtual reality film is dawning, but will it prove as exhilarating and disorienting for modern viewers as the experience of early cinema was for the audiences who watched the Ciotat train arrive at the station in the Lumières' short in 1896?

By Marisol Grandon



"Last night I was in the kingdom of the shadows," Soviet novelist Maxim Gorky wrote in reaction to the Lumière brothers' first films at the Nizhny Novgorod Fair in July 1896. "If only you knew how strange it is to be there. Everything vanishes and a train appears on the screen. It speeds straight at you – watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack of lacerated flesh and splintered bones... But this, too, is but a train of shadows."

Gorky's astonishment at the Lumières' *The Arrival of a Train at Ciotat* (1896) conveys the exhilarating sensations of early cinema. The new medium generated wonder, unease, terror, excitement, anxiety. Moving objects disappearing beyond the edge of the frame were inexplicable, noteworthy, a stimulating and thrilling marvel.

We are now entering a similar era of wonder as millions experience the medium of virtual reality for the first time. But what is VR? Put simply it's a set of goggles you wear or hold over your eyes that allows you to view a 360-degree filmic environment. Up, down, behind you, there are no screens – the viewer chooses where to look. Add a pair of headphones and the feeling of immersion is intensified, so much so that it is advisable to be seated or standing with someone you trust. Done well, VR can transport the wearer away from reality in a way no other medium can. "True VR" is stereoscopic, meaning viewers get a different image in each eye, adding the illusion of depth. Headsets made for VR determine the quality of the experience, but it is possible to watch VR films simply using a smartphone and a piece of foldable cardboard, such as Google Cardboard.

Lingering in the minds of sceptics are the more muted incarnations of early VR technology of the 1980s and 90s, which caused many to dismiss the phenomenon as solely a gaming medium. After all, VR was born from *Doom*, John Carmack's influential first-person shooter. Yet in 2015, investment in VR was rampant in Los Angeles, with this year expected to be decisive as consumer-ready headsets such as Oculus Rift, Samsung Gear and HTC Vive reach the market. Google Cardboard – the £12 version of the more sophisticated headgear – is readily

available. In November, the *New York Times* delivered 1.2 million cardboard viewers to its subscribers, with a range of documentaries ready to watch on its NYTVR app. There is a distinct air of a gold rush as film industry players work out whether, and how, to adapt, and how to make it pay beyond the most obvious genres: games, extreme sports and pornography.

Watching a well-produced VR film is overwhelming and best enjoyed in short bursts. Headsets completely envelop the field of vision and the ability to look in any direction can surprise and delight. With the right film, the first encounter is wholly unfamiliar and astonishing, although vertigo and motion sickness – the *bête noire* of the industry – are common side effects and immersed viewers can become so disoriented they can walk into walls.

Yet the effect can also be phenomenally beautiful. In one popular silent YouTube video, the viewer is perched on top of a mountain in the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard to witness a perfect solar eclipse. The natural world – alongside horror, live music and deep space – is a regular theme of these early films. We are invited to take space walks, visit African savannahs or swim with dolphins. "VR has incredible potential. It takes you to places you could never have dreamed existed," says Sir David Attenborough, who has narrated *First Life*, a 15-minute VR film exploring the dawn of life in the earth's ancient oceans, made in collaboration with the Natural History Museum and production company Atlantic Pictures.

Early cinema historian Stephen Bottomore has argued that "when a new medium is introduced to an 'inexperienced viewer', his senses need to adjust until, through some kind of learning process, they build up enough experience to reintegrate themselves into a new mode of operation". This process is now happening all over again.

Chris Milk, a veteran music promo director, is leading an ambitious charge to persuade a sceptical establishment of the medium's cinematic value. In a TED Talk in March 2015, he declared he is "done with rectangles". He went on to co-direct a series of films with the United Nations senior adviser and filmmaker Gabo Arora, the first of which is a powerful documentary *Clouds over Sidra*.



VIRTUAL REALITY BITES
Done well, VR can transport the wearer away from reality in a way no other medium can and while the type of headset determines the quality of the experience, it is still possible to watch VR films cheaply using Google Cardboard (above left)



Sidra, a 12-year-old Syrian living in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, guides the viewer through the features of her semi-permanent existence in the tent city – an austere living room, a dirt football pitch, a bakery so vivid it's hard to believe you aren't there breathing the aroma of fresh flatbread. Dignified and humble, Sidra shares a meal with the viewer as a voiceover details her hopes and dreams. The film won an Interactive Award at Sheffield Doc/Fest 2015 and has been seen by international policy decision-makers the world over. One by one, they were bowled over by the experience. Fittingly Milk has also evoked the Lumière's 'train effect' knowingly in *Evolution of Verse*, a 360-degree CGI-rendered short that screened at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival.

"Behind the bells and whistles, we're creating stories," says Milk. "What's special and different about *Clouds over Sidra* is the level of immersion the technology provides. *Clouds* is like stepping into another world, walking a mile in someone else's shoes. Once we found Sidra, her life informed how we captured the environment. We agreed that virtually placing people within this camp might greatly impact how the world sees Syrian refugees. The

goal from the outset was to create a sharper and more intimate form of empathy."

One of the many affecting moments in *Clouds over Sidra* is when a group of Syrian refugee children surround the viewer, ghost-like, full of weary smiles and innocent curiosity, albeit pixelated. It's a familiar scene for anyone who has done field photography and has proved capable of reducing viewers to tears.

"So much of *Clouds* appears startlingly simple and uncurated," says Arora. "We wanted the viewer to feel as if they were actually there alongside Sidra. Our intention was to make a documentary, but we wanted to do something more in the spirit of Werner Herzog's documentaries, which work on the notion of 'ecstatic truth'; that facts are static while the truth needs to be revealed by artistry."

VR not only represents a potentially major shift in exhibition (from viewings in dark screening rooms, to solo and synchronised headset displays), but also in how cameras capture their subjects, as Arora explains. "We started filming in December 2014, after other celebrities and filmmakers had already visited and filmed in the camp. Most people I approached were just tired

'Clouds over Sidra', which follows a girl in a Syrian refugee camp, is like stepping into another world, walking a mile in someone else's shoes



THE THICK OF IT VR can offer viewers a unique perspective on global issues, including life in a Syrian refugee camp in *Clouds over Sidra* (top), the sights and sounds of a demonstration against police brutality in New York in *Millions March* (middle) and the world as experienced by a Liberian Ebola survivor, in *Waves of Grace* (bottom)

of being filmed. They felt their sufferings were being exploited, that they were telling their story repeatedly yet their situation remained unchanged. But they reacted differently when I showed them the virtual reality camera and explained our purpose. There was immediate enthusiasm and intrigue. The camera system is less invasive and can be left for minutes at a time alone, which leads people to forget it's there, allowing them to have a more natural experience with filmmaking."

Aspiring VR filmmakers are faced with a bewildering array of competing camera equipment, content platforms and viewing hardware, with new products launched all the time. "We use whatever's necessary for the story we're trying to tell," says Milk. "A lot of what we use, we build in-house. How we rig, how we lens, how we ingest the footage, what software we use, what software we create—all depends on the needs of the project. We've gone out with a rig of eight GoPros before, which is more

of a run-and-gun type set-up. We're currently shooting in Prague with a rig that didn't exist two weeks ago."

Spike Jonze last year produced *Millions March*, a blood-pumping 360-degree documentary created with Milk for VICE News about New York's 'Day of Anger' protest demanding justice for unarmed black men killed by police. It's an electrifying use of the medium. New York's vertical geography combined with the sheer strength of feeling among protesters makes for a jolting experience. What is remarkable is how the film captures an intangible sense of danger and personal suffering—from seeing the whites of the eyes of impassioned demonstrators to hearing drums of angry protest behind you. Despite the guarantee of safety, the mind is alerted to the ever-present threat of police brutality. It's a deeply moving and immersive experience.

Other documentary pioneers include American journalist Nonny de la Peña and Oscar Raby, from Chile, both exploring the possibilities of interactive documentary via 3D-modelled environments layered with real audio, locations and characters. De la Peña is known for another examination of the Syrian conflict, *Project Syria*, as well as *Hunger in Los Angeles*—a critical study of America's neglected poor—and *Kiya*, the story of two women who attempt to rescue their sister from a violent ex-boyfriend. Touted by some as the 'Godmother of VR' for her extensive work in virtual reality and augmented reality, de la Peña has developed a highly charged, political visual language. "When people put on our goggles, they are fully transported to another world," she says. "There is a solid academic, neuro-scientific grounding for the notion of 'presence', of your mind tricking your body into believing that you're somewhere else. That presence is the defining element of our work, and of all good VR. In *Hunger in Los Angeles*, for example, a piece about waiting in line at a food bank in downtown Los Angeles, we've seen countless audience members get to their knees to try to help someone who has had a seizure and collapsed."

Raby's film *Assent* is a more personal affair, a challenging autobiographical piece which looks like a traditional video game. The spectator takes the role of Raby's father, guided by the filmmaker through the former's very worst memory—a day soon after the military coup in Chile in 1973 when he witnessed the execution of a group of prisoners as an officer in the military.

"VR is of course a tool for all sorts of story makers, but it is noticeable the enthusiasm with which it has been embraced in the activist space," says Raby. "At least in its early days it has been quite a disruptive medium—one where you can gain attention just by making a piece of work. That won't last forever, but it is important now, when the competition for eyeballs and attention is so vast." Yet he does not entirely agree with Milk's soundbite-friendly description of VR as the "ultimate empathy machine". "VR as the ultimate empathy machine obscures what theatre has excelled at for ages," he says.

This analogy with the theatre is one de la Peña also recognises: "VR is a whole new kind of spatial storytelling that has more in common with interactive, experiential theatre than traditional filmmaking," she says. "The traditional notion of cutting doesn't really apply in VR, since you can't control your user's point of view."

Raby, whose Melbourne-based production studio VRTVO is a nod to Soviet documentary pioneer Dziga

Vertov, correlates the popularity of immersive events practised by the likes of the Punchdrunk theatre company, to our collective desire for more complex narrative experiences in the digital age.

Heeding this call perhaps, the *New York Times* produced *The Displaced* – a VR documentary about three children who have fled their homes. The stories from South Sudan, Lebanon and the Ukraine revive an empathy that has seemingly been in short supply over years of dehumanising media treatment. One astonishing scene shows an aid airdrop from the point of view of a beneficiary on the ground. It's among the best scenes to date in VR documentary.

At the light entertainment end of production, Oculus Story Studio – the creative arm of the VR hardware firm Oculus Rift – produced *Henry*, directed by former Pixar animator Ramiro López Dau, whose credits include *Brave* (2012) and *Monsters University* (2013). The film, narrated by Elijah Wood, recounts the story of a cartoon hedgehog who has lost his friends. The relationship between Pixar and Oculus will be interesting to watch.

Mesmerising abstract pieces are emerging all the time, as designers, developers and artists begin to experiment and collaborate. One such piece, *Tana Pura*, is a psychedelic swirling lightshow – created by New York-based Mike Tucker and set to an original composition by Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood – which explores the moments following death, and the transition of the soul into the afterlife. Raby anticipates more work of this kind: "We'll see a lot more variety in the narrative VR work that's being created over the next 12 months than we have in the past couple of years."

VR enthusiasts are convinced of the medium's long-

Spielberg's enthusiasm for VR signals a change of mood in Hollywood, perhaps buoyed by the prediction that the industry will generate \$150 billion in revenue by 2020

HISTORY REPEATING
Oscar Raby's *Assent* (bottom) tells the personal story of his father's harrowing experiences after the Chilean coup in 1973, while Mike Tucker's *Tana Pura* (below) demonstrates the potential of the medium for abstract artists

term appeal, both for video-based and interactive formats. "Traditional filmmakers are really warming up to VR as a storytelling device," says Milk. "We've been taking meetings all across town with some really great traditional cinema creators, and everyone is bringing their own unique perspective to the virtual space. Everyone's waiting for the dam to break and VR to really spill into households, which will happen very soon. What's great though is the amount of support and interest we've received at this early stage."

Certainly, Steven Spielberg's enthusiasm for VR signals a change of mood in Hollywood, perhaps buoyed by *Fortune* magazine's prediction that the industry will generate \$150 billion in revenue by 2020. Notably, in 2015 Spielberg joined the Virtual Reality Company as an adviser. Recent endorsements from Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg and Pixar's chief creative officer John Lasseter – and a tentative interest from Werner Herzog – have increased attention on the medium's potential. Until now, both George Lucas and James Cameron have played down its relevance, with Cameron famously calling it a 'yawn'.

While true VR art is scarce so far, there is a consensus that smut will sell headsets. As the literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman has written, "Great art is always flanked by its dark sisters, blasphemy and pornography." The 23-year-old inventor of Oculus Rift, Palmer Luckey, was quick to concede the inevitability of VR porn in an interview with the *Daily Beast*: "There's a list of things people want to experience: fantastic things, and naked people. That will never change. We have naked people pictures going back to the cavemen."

Milk and Arora, meanwhile, are confident in their mission and believe there is space for auteurs in VR. *My Mother's Wing*, the latest UN VR film is set in Gaza and features a Palestinian mother who describes her life and the unspeakable losses caused by the bombardments of 2014. *Waves of Grace*, a short UN documentary about a Liberian Ebola survivor, shows life inside a treatment clinic and beyond – locations the media was not able to visit. It appeared as part of January's Sundance New Frontier VR line-up along with 30 other titles spanning sensory assaults, such as Ridley Scott and Robert Stromberg's VR spinoff for *The Martian* (2015) and blue whale animation *The Blue Encounter*, through to more gentle pieces such as *The Rose and I*, a handcrafted interpretation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novella *The Little Prince*, from Eugene Chung's Penrose Studios.

However we react to VR, the status of cinema will continue to be redefined, just as it has been following the advent of digital cameras and projection. "I have seen reluctance from the filmmaking community in embracing VR," says Raby. "I have seen it here in Melbourne, I saw it in Mexico as well as Argentina and Brazil. But resistance actually comes from financial structures, not from the language crafters. This fear is symbolised by the question, 'Is this yet another screen that's going to take from our pot?'" Whatever happens next, the advent of spherical cinema will lead to profound questions about the nature, virtue and validity of rectangles. ●

i A selection from Sundance's New Frontier line-up can be viewed on the festival's VR app on Android. *Clouds over Sidra*, *The Displaced*, *Kiya*, *Millions March* and *Waves of Grace* can be viewed on the Vrse and NYTVR apps with Google Cardboard



AFTER THE GOLDRUSH

Miguel Gomes's three-part 'Arabian Nights' blends documentary and fiction in a labyrinth of tales exploring the travails of Portugal in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Here the director discusses the grim reality of austerity, his long fascination with Scheherazade's folk tales, and why he just kept telling stories until the money ran out

By Nick Pinkerton

TALES OF THE UNPROTECTED
Images from Miguel Gomes's
trilogy (opposite): *Arabian
Nights: Volume One* – *The
Restless One, Volume Two* –
The Desolate One and *Volume
Three* – *The Enchanted One*

A friend and I were recently discussing the bumper crop of what we will call 'international arthouse' cinema at the turn of the century, and whether the film cultural/ critical apparatus existed today to nurture careers towards their full potential in the way it had for, say, Claire Denis or Tsai Ming-liang. Who on the Euro fest circuit now, we asked ourselves, made each new film seem like an unmissable event, and wasn't just reworking the same bag of tricks proven to go over with a cinephile audience? And then we remembered Miguel Gomes.


Gomes's *Arabian Nights* triptych, the follow-up to his charming and inviting *Tabu* (2012), comprises three feature-length films, each divided into chapters which playfully toggle between various registers of documentary and fiction filmmaking. The chapters have diverse approaches but are unified by a concern with the travails of Portugal during an EU-imposed programme of economic austerity, which is paralleled with the antiquity of Scheherazade and the *Arabian Nights*. An apotheosis of the 21st-century docu-fiction tendency, the trilogy is a work of enormous tenderness and intuition, the creation of a simultaneously humble and ambitious artist at the very height of his not inconsiderable powers. During a stopover at the New York Film Festival, I sat down with Gomes in the hope of getting some insight into his method and madness.

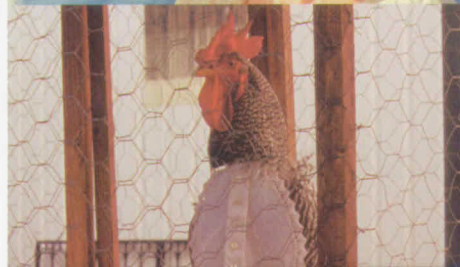
Nick Pinkerton: Was the idea to use *The Arabian Nights* as an overarching construct in place before you began filming?

Miguel Gomes: I always wanted to make a film with tales, with this kind of structure. I'd been fascinated by the book since I first laid eyes on it when I was 12 or 13. The labyrinth of stories gave me vertigo – the always changing narrators, a very baroque kind of structure, the absurdity – it's like the Bible. I saw some resemblance between the wild side of the book and what we were living through in Portuguese society, which was kind of wild, very extreme.

And so I thought about putting them together, I even made up something we called the 'Method of the Three Columns'. In the column on the left you put everything that is really happening in Portugal, everything that comes from the newspapers and from the team of journalists who were working with us. And in the right column we put things that came completely from our imagination. And the film would be the middle column, which would result from merging these two columns. But of course things are more complex, and the things that were in the first column – reality – had this kind of fictional aspect because much of what went on in them was really insane. And the things we made up in the fiction column came from our experience of living in that country, they were the result of living in a certain time and a certain place. So even if we merge the two columns, each column was already merged, because you don't have categories as pure as 'reality' and 'imagination'. We tried to follow this method, but gave up two weeks into shooting because it was too boring being so scientific.

NP: I know you had a team of researchers taking clippings. What sort of things did you ask them to keep an eye out for?

MG: They knew the idea was to have TV news as reinvented by Scheherazade, which is a contradiction – but I like contradiction. It's the only way to get interesting stuff and make cinema – to have clashes, paradoxes, things that aren't supposed to go together but finally do. We didn't give very precise directions to the team of journalists – they left the office, they were in the field, they travelled the country. And we talked to them, said, "Okay, you're researching ten different things, 



there are two that we think have potential to be a story for Scheherazade, so please do this and this and this about these two subjects." It was very proactive.

NP: You talk about TV news and Scheherazade as a paradox, but you could say that the 24-hour news cycle is a perfect manifestation of the story that never stops being told.

MG: Yeah, the world is spinning and there are things happening, lots and lots of stories to be told. I even imagined in the beginning that this was not a film but a TV series, and we could contact people from the other PIIGS countries [the Eurozone countries considered economically weaker following the 2008 economic crisis: Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain]. And each one of us would do one episode every week. But I didn't know if anyone would be interested in doing this for television, and I don't know if television would be interested in having something like this.

NP: How much of what you shot made it into the trilogy?

MG: There were sequences in every segment that were cut, but every story is in the film. Of course we cannot make a film that pretends to be a portrait of one year in a country, even a small one like Portugal, because there are thousands of stories to tell. This was the big tragedy of this film: every time we chose to shoot one story, we overlooked 50 that might have been better. But if you call a film *Arabian Nights*, it's not supposed to be a small film. So I spent all the money trying to shoot the most I could.

NP: What was the process of deciding what to shoot?

MG: I don't think there was a rational process; it was a desire to go to a certain place to film certain people to work with certain actors... It depended on the moment. In the beginning we didn't know what would come, so we didn't have any idea of the final structure. Then it was a little bit easier because in the middle of the process we had already shot many stories, and we could see more what was possible; we could think, "Maybe it's important to have a story like 'The Tears of the Judge'." And, "Okay, if we're going to have 'The Tears of the Judge', let's shoot a very minimal deranged western with a very silent guy who's almost the opposite of 'The Judge', let's do the story of this outlaw who is famous because he evaded the police for almost a month and a half and was received like a hero even though he killed two people." It was easier to understand what we hadn't filmed, and see what we had to add.

NP: Despite the fact that it's a movie very much found in the shooting, there are certain themes that seem to run through it. Were there any connections you were surprised to find when assembling the entire thing?

MG: I rediscovered something that I knew from previous films. This one was made a little like advancing with a blindfold on, without knowing precisely what kind of film we would get. I've done that on a smaller scale before, but this was on a much, much larger scale. I found out: it's you. It's the people who work with you, who are making up the stories and deciding what kinds of things to shoot. When it's closing time, and you're out of options, some of your obsessions will always reappear. It's a personal film, it's not an industrial film. You have the freedom to shoot whatever attracts you, and then you discover something... For instance, I never thought that in the first volume when I was running away from my film it was like Scheherazade trying to run away from her job of telling stories in the third volume – I only



This film was made a little like advancing with a blindfold on, without knowing precisely what kind of film we would get

discovered that afterwards. There are things that reappear, things that rhyme and play with each other, because you are working at a personal level, and you are working with the things that obsess you.

NP: One through-line I found was the question of what happens when something new, an invasive presence, is introduced to a closed ecosystem. This is there in how you look at Portugal's role in the Eurozone, at Portugal within the global economy. And it's not necessarily looked at in terms of poor, tiny Portugal, at the mercy of the larger countries, but within the larger framework of history, where such shifts have always happened.

MG: The history of Portugal in the 20th century is one of isolation, and this is still the problem nowadays. We had a dictatorship until the 70s, so when democracy came we were a weak, underdeveloped society. We progressed with the help of Europe, but we were always behind. And this is one of the problems of Europe nowadays: there are very different countries with very different dimensions, some of them with stronger economies and some with weaker economies. The weaker economies cannot stand in this very strong current, which is quite nice for the strongest countries like Germany, but for the others it's very hard. We're finding out what we suspected, which is that the bond between all these different countries wasn't in terms of values – this very advanced concept of democracy and welfare systems. We see now that's bullshit. It was about money. When the money flows, everything's okay. And when it doesn't, well, the shit hits the fan. But it interests me to see an ecosystem that's evolved for a community be tested by external elements that change the balance inside. It's not necessarily a negative thing. We should be open to it, even if in the end we're in pretty bad shape as a result. It can't be otherwise.

NP: Again, there's that broad view, where even though you've made a film that's very much about events in 2013-14, you're never losing sight of antiquity.

MG: The first card of text in 'The Inebriating Chorus of the Chaffinches' [an hour-long segment about men training birds to sing for a competition] starts with Darwin talking about *On the Origin of Species*. I like that Scheherazade can talk about Darwin – the mythology of the film is a little bit different from the mythology of the book. And the 'Chaffinches' section, it's something that looks so

surreal for me. But the guys who have the finches, they do something awesome, trying to invent birdsong on a computer and impose that on a bird. It seems like radical fiction, like something coming from *Arabian Nights*.

Filming this gave me the opportunity to show these working-class guys tell the story of my city, Lisbon—especially neighbourhoods that people don't talk about that much. We tend to talk only about problems with drugs, social problems... but the fact that these guys who were born in slum houses still have this hobby gives you an idea of what the neighbourhood was. Filming these secret hobbies was like entering into a parallel world where I could still talk about society, particularly about working-class guys in my town, and at the same time show these tough guys who could be extras in a Scorsese film from the 70s fall silent hearing birdsong in a birdsong contest. I had this sensation of filming another world almost without making any effort, just by putting the camera there, entering the houses of these people, I could see something that was pure fantasy.

NP: The most moving section of the trilogy for me is the almost rhapsodic moment in 'The Owners of Dixie' when we look into all of the different units in the block of flats, and very briefly see all of these hidden lives.

MG: This segment evolved organically. We decided to shoot in the same towers where the suicidal couple who inspired the story really died. I thought, "This is a little bit morbid to film this story in the same place," but I couldn't choose another. I don't give the reason why these people decided to die at the same time. There should be very strong reasons for two people who decide to do that, but I don't know them.

For me it was very connected with this suburb of Lisbon, and this story would only make sense in that environment. These towers are not so common in Portugal, where if a building is ten stories high it's the Empire State Building. So we said, "We're going to shoot here, but let's involve all the people." So we spent weeks gathering stories from every one of them, the stories of that building, what happened there. And then we asked them to play themselves in some of these stories—it was a reaction to shooting in a real place where this suicide happened, and wanting to not only talk about the suicide story, but to talk about other small stories. Because the suicide, which is our big story, cannot be isolated.

NP: Something else that I found running through the film, evident in 'The Men with Hard-Ons' section, is an idea of the existence or persistence of magical thinking in the contemporary world. There's almost a sense of economists as a modern priest caste, the new witch doctors.

MG: Yeah, I prefer the old-school wizards. They seemed

CRASH COURSE
Director Miguel Gomes (far left, opposite) filming the segment 'The Swim of the Magnificents' in part one of the trilogy, and appearing in a cameo in *Volume Three – The Enchanted One* (below)

more effective. The story of the wizard came from *Arabian Nights*, a kind of magical fiction. Sex and power are associated, they come together, but not in the way shown in the film. That segment follows the rules of the farce, a popular culture genre, mocking power and everything, but when we are talking about reality and fantasy, the reality of this segment is the reality of a fantasy. We all shared something very real—I am talking about 'we', the Portuguese—which was a desire that all these austerity measures would stop. And so we just made up a way: in our case a wizard with an aphrodisiac potion. But even that fantasy doesn't go well, because this segment ends in the same place that it begins. Even this fantasy doesn't work.

NP: The sequencing of the segments within the volumes is very interesting. Maybe because of the way that you use pop music throughout, it seems almost like a mix-tape logic. What was the process of deciding the ultimate order of the material like?

MG: During the editing process, it was me and two editors in two editing rooms. One of these editors, Telmo Churro, was also a screenwriter with me, and the other screenwriter, Mariana Ricardo, was often in the editing room in order to think with us, because if we decided to put a certain segment in one volume it would be completely different than if it were in another. We did critiques, and we would vote, and when I was losing I imposed my senior vote, so I would finally have my way.

We thought that by the end of each volume we should have more emotional fire. For me, the end of each volume—for example, 'The Swim of the Magnificents' at the end of *Volume One*—there's a kind of emotional strength to finish that volume. We talked a lot about where to put 'The Tears of the Judge' and 'The Owners of Dixie' in *Volume Two*, going back and forth, but we finally thought that 'The Judge' was so strong, it's like a black hole, it has to go right in the middle, where 'Dixie' has the emotional strength appropriate to end *Volume Two*.

NP: A lot of the emotional high points are accompanied by pop cues. How do you decide when and where to bring music in? The Langley Schools Music Project, for example?

MG: I thought at that moment of the film, which is the end, to have a choir, as the film itself gets very choral, with lots and lots of characters. And the Langley Schools' version of 'Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft' is very fragile. It's children, but it's not like a children's choir that would perform for Obama, it has a very arts-and-crafts kind of sound. It's a choir, so it sounds big, but at the same time it's a little bit clumsy, and I think it's perfect.

NP: There's a sense that you were possessed by the sheer number of things you found to film, so what was the point when you were filming when you knew you had it and were ready to quit?

MG: It's very practical. It's when the money ran out. There's always one day where the producer comes to me and he says, "Game over." And when it's game over, I can't do anything, because I don't have the producer's credit cards. I have to stop. ☹

i *Arabian Nights: Volume One – The Restless One* is released in UK cinemas on 22 April, *Volume Two* is released on 29 April and *Volume Three* on 6 May. The trilogy will be available to watch on MUBI from May. The first two parts are reviewed on pages 70 and 71 and the final part will be reviewed next month





ALL POWER TO THE SOVIETS
Agnieszka Holland (right)
documented the political
world of her youth in the
HBO television series
Burning Bush (left), which
explores the aftermath of
the Prague Spring in 1968

STAYING POWER

From her portrait of life under Communism in 'A Woman Alone' to the plight of the Jews in World War II in 'Europa Europa' to her TV work on 'The Wire' and 'Treme', Polish director Agnieszka Holland's remarkable body of work offers a masterclass in versatility

By Isabel Stevens

Agnieszka Holland was a precocious 15-year-old when she decided to become a filmmaker. She has notebooks from those years in which she wrote that three things were important to her: visual expression (she originally wanted to be a painter), telling stories, and—the really precocious bit—power, although she didn't want to be a politician to get it. "It was the mid-60s, when cinema was very artistic, original and personal," she tells me. "There were great filmmakers then: Andrzej Wajda and Andrzej Munk in Poland; Bergman, Pasolini, Antonioni in Europe; Kurosawa in Japan. Cinema was the medium of the times." When she was 13, Holland's father had died in police custody; the Communist authorities called it suicide. As a result, going to the renowned Łódź Film School was out of the question. Instead, inspired by Milos Forman, Vera Chytilová and the creativity she saw in the films of the Czech New Wave, she studied filmmaking in Prague.

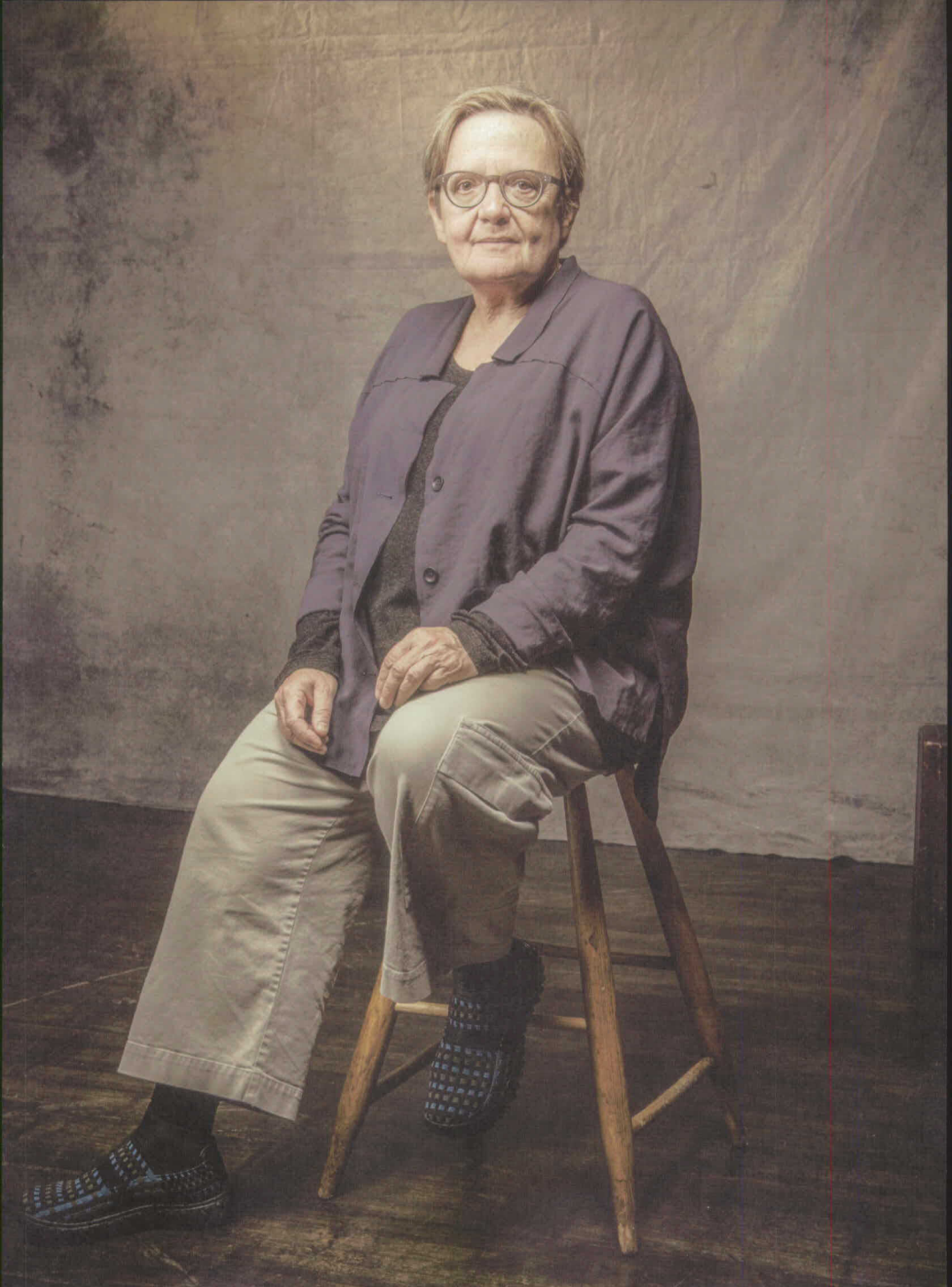
When Holland was arrested during the Soviet repression that followed the democratising efforts of the 1968 Prague Spring, she started a philosophical conversation with her interrogator in the middle of the prison.

"Instead of talking about who helped me print illegal papers, we talked about freedom and justice," she recalls. "I succeeded in creating a kind of human link. At the same time, I managed to control the situation."

Holland graduated in 1971 and returned to Poland, but soon found that it wasn't easy to make films. She sought out Wajda, who led a production group, but it was five years before one of her scripts was greenlit as she was regarded with suspicion by the regime. "Wajda, at this time, was quite naive," she says. "He was so into his work that he didn't realise how much the regime was controlling everything. At first he was a little annoyed by it all. Then, when he realised about this personal blacklist, he was extremely supportive. He even offered to adopt me and give me his name. That was very touching. But I didn't want it."

In the 40-plus years since, Holland has directed more than 20 films, including classic Polish dramas (*Provincial Actors*, 1979), romances (an adaptation of Henry James's short novel *Washington Square* in 1997), gothic children's tales (*The Secret Garden*, 1993) and films about the plight of the Jews during World War II (*Europa Europa*, 1990, and *In Darkness*, 2011). She has collaborated frequently too—on the scripts for Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1976) and *Rough Treatment* (1978), and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours* trilogy (1993-94). She's worked in Poland, across Europe, and in America and Canada. Making two films in Germany without speaking German made her realise verbal communication during filmmaking was overrated. "You can pass on feelings and information without knowing the language so well," she says.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FABIENNE HALL/STUDIOCONTINENT BY GUYTON/SHANE





UNDER THE YOKE
(Above, from left) Agnieszka Holland's adaptation of children's novel *The Secret Garden* (1993), her brutal examination of life under Communism *A Woman Alone* (1981), and World War II drama *Europa Europa* (1990)

She was quick to recognise the creative freedom that long-form television offered and has directed episodes of several acclaimed US series, including *The Wire*, *Treme* and *House of Cards*. She has also been show-runner on her own, very personal HBO project, *Burning Bush*. This 2013 mini-series revisited the aftermath of the Prague Spring, focusing on the repercussions of the suicidal political protest by the student Jan Palach, who in January 1969, aged 20, set fire to himself in Wenceslas Square; he was the same age as Holland. Over the years, she expected Czech filmmakers to do something substantial about the era of 'normalisation' after 1969, during which the Communist authorities reasserted full control over the country, but they never did.

Holland has a forceful voice, the kind you can tell has taken part in many filmmaking battles. When I ask where she had the greatest freedom to make films, her answer is, unexpectedly, 1970s Poland. "It was creatively and socially a very lucky and happy period in Polish cinema, even if it was shadowed by the censorship and persecution coming from the regime. It was very liberal, particularly compared with Czechoslovakia at that time, which was under a very dark regime. We knew the rules of the censorship and to some extent we avoided it. We were smart enough to shoot the movie in a way that would be acceptable for the censor. We threw him the fake, brutally unorthodox scene that he would censor, and then passing underneath was something that was really important to us. This censorship also had some creative value. We developed a stylistic language with metaphors and symbols, and the audience was trained to read them. *Provincial Actors* was just a small release, but it was popular, even though it was quite gloomy. The regime fought it a bit, but not so much as to ban it."

"In Poland, no one was worried about the bankability of a film. No one told us we had to have this actor because otherwise the distributor wouldn't buy it. Or that the pace is too slow. And the audience wasn't spoiled by commercials; they were fresher and more sensitive. I have never found that kind of mutual understanding with my Western producers. In France it is better. In the US it is the industry. You have to be very strong to defend what you believe in." She gets frustrated by demands about a film's length. "I mostly like a film to be longer than it has to be. But compromises are inevitable. It's somebody's money, and he wants this money back."

Unsurprisingly, outspoken characters feature regularly in Holland's films, and have since the start of her career, with the forthright theatrical couple at the heart of *Provincial Actors*. The films' anger is tempered by moments of dark absurdity. In *A Woman Alone* (1981) – one

of the fiercest, bleakest assessments of life under communism – it's single mother Irena who takes on the system and everyone who is taking advantage of her as she tries to break free of the tiny shack where she lives. To make it as realistic as possible, Holland went to the impoverished fringes of Warsaw to film. Poverty then was hidden away, she says, and many of the crew were shocked at what they saw. Such a vivid sense of place and commitment to authenticity would become trademarks of her work. For *In Darkness* (2011), about a group of Jews who survived the Holocaust by hiding in the sewers of Lvov, she shot with minimal light, often just using the actors' torches. She was determined that the tunnels would not look too cinematic, like those in *The Third Man* (1949).

A Woman Alone was banned in Poland under martial law, introduced just as the film was ready to be screened. Holland was abroad, but says Wajda tried in vain to save the film by cutting some scenes the authorities didn't like. Her brother-in-law stole a print and Hubert Bals, the late director of the Rotterdam Film Festival, who was visiting Poland at the time, smuggled it out in his suitcase.

A WOMAN'S PLACE

From the powerless Irena in *A Woman Alone* to the lawyer Dagmar in the recent *Burning Bush*, who takes a huge risk by fighting the regime, Holland's films have often probed the position of women in society. It's a subject she is giving more and more thought. She is currently editing *Game Count*, her adaptation of a novel by Polish author Olga Tokarczuk. "It's a very strange kind of story. The main character is an old woman living in the mountains. All the men around her are killed. They are mostly hunters. I call it an anarchistic feminist ecological black comedy with some thriller suspense aspects."

But she says that she has never thought of herself as a 'female' director: "I thought, 'I'm a filmmaker. I'm making films, and they are mine.' Yes, I am a woman. That makes them slightly different. But only slightly." Agnieszka Varda's films were important to her when she was growing up, particularly *Le Bonheur* (1965). It made her realise that "you can have the sensibility of a woman and the sharpness which some people thought that only men can have". In 1970s Poland there were a lot of women on set with her. But when in 1992 she came to Britain to shoot an adaptation of the children's novel *The Secret Garden*, she was surprised there was not a single woman in the crew, even in the traditionally feminine roles of costume and make-up. "Sometimes I was the only woman on the set – plus Maggie Smith," she recalls.

The Secret Garden was one of Holland's favourite books as a child. When she came to adapt it, she didn't see just a

Cinema is my first love and my main goal. I really enjoy making films, but it's not so easy these days. One movie can take at least three, maybe five, years. To do TV in between is very refreshing



sentimental story but a story about cruelty. It was her first brush with Hollywood and she clashed with the Warner Bros executive on the film. He was expecting cute, sympathetic children and wanted re-edits. Holland wanted to show the film to the heads of the studio as it was. She went on a three-day strike in the cutting room and won.

Just as Holland's films have had a grand scope, critiquing life under Communist and Nazi rule, many of the TV projects for which she has directed episodes have the same critical and panoramic ambition, but put the moral decay of America under the magnifying glass instead. "If the series is smart and deep," she says, "it allows you to do something that has an epic dimension. The audience needs that. Our times are very complicated. They are simplified by the means of communication – by the internet, social media. Simultaneously people need to see the reality in some corners of life." She regards some prestige series as being today's equivalent of novels by Dickens, Dostoevsky and Victor Hugo.

Cinema no longer holds the power Holland hankered after when she was younger. "A single movie can very rarely have the same impact as TV. I was watching how a TV series can change the minds of people in America. I'm sure that without *West Wing* or *24*, Obama would never have been president. Once it became possible for a president to be black on TV, people could accept it in reality." But she also believes television can have a dangerous impact: "*House of Cards* is shaping the negative vision of Washington politics – and that leads us to Donald Trump."

Her motives for working in television are varied: "A film can be a very lonely affair. It's a one-time meeting with people. And sometimes it's not a happy meeting. Cinema is my first love and my main goal. I really enjoy making films, but it's not so easy these days. One movie can take at least three, maybe five, years. To do TV in between is very refreshing."

Holland believes part of the reason she is so often approached to direct episodes of series with tight shooting schedules is down to her formative filmmaking years in Poland, where she had to comprehensively map a film out before shooting began. "They didn't produce film [stock] in Poland. They had to export it from the West, and it was expensive," she explains. "We had the freedom of 50 or 60-day shoots, but we were shooting on a ratio of one to four. So for one hour of finished film we could have only four hours of footage. You can't shoot the way everyone does today. They shoot master shots from all directions and then assemble it in the editing suite. We had to storyboard and edit the film in our heads. That was a great lesson. It taught you about point of view. To choose a very strong point of view and follow it."

I ask what level of creative input is feasible as a director of one or two episodes in an established series. "You are serving the series. You are not expressing yourself so much, but I hope I do bring something extra to it." In 'Moral Midgetry', the first episode of *The Wire* that Holland directed, in season three, the camera is notably dynamic, roving the chaotic streets of 'Hamsterdam' with characters coming in and out of focus and also imaginatively framed in mirrors and windows. "I have a very strong need to put the camera in a certain place; to do a shot in a specific way," she says. "I'm controlling everything. Most directors probably give it to the cinematographer. I'm fighting for every camera movement. That's why it has a different energy." The way Holland, at the end of that episode, handled the fight scene and its tense aftermath between gang leader Avon Barksdale and his number two, Stringer Bell, was what she says made David Simon entrust her with further episodes and the pilot for *Treme*.

That desire to bring a different energy to her TV work is also helped by her aversion to cliché. "I try to avoid the traditional television storytelling way of when somebody speaks you have a close up. And then another close-up," she says. She still uses the close-up regularly, however – it's how her own series *Burning Bush* starts, with the detail of the points being switched on a tramline. "I like watching things and human faces in close-up. But I try and use them in a subtle and meaningful way."

The main work of a director though, Holland believes, lies with the actors. The opportunity to create and people her own "parallel world", as she puts it, was what drove her to create *Burning Bush*. "Ninety per cent of the film is decided when the actors are cast. The most important thing is that they feel familiar with each other. During the rehearsal, it's more of a therapeutic session than a regular rehearsal. I like to do it some weeks before the shoot, so they have some history before they meet on set. Afterwards I like to read through and rehearse a bit, but not too much. When I see an actor feels it and is going in the right direction, I like to stop the rehearsal. I don't want the performance to be final because, afterwards, he or she will be looking to repeat it and it will be lost. They should be secure but curious. Secure that they know and feel the character, but curious what this character will do when the camera starts running. It should be somewhere between deep preparation and improvisation."

i Agnieszka Holland will be in conversation at BFI Southbank, London, on 12 April as part of a short retrospective, 'Lighting Fires: The Film and TV of Agnieszka Holland', shown in partnership with the 14th Kinoteka Polish Film Festival (7-28 April)

WAR AND PEACE
(Above, from left) World War II drama *In Darkness* (2011), Stringer Bell and Avon Barksdale facing off in *The Wire* (2002-08), and the New Orleans jazz drama *Treme* (2010-13)

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WESTERN

In the troubled aftermath of World War II a new breed of western emerged, borrowing elements of *film noir* to present a very different kind of hero to the one who had ridden West in search of land, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the triumphant expansionist dramas of the 1920s and 30s. Obsessive, violent and often masochistic, these angry, alienated protagonists lent the films psychological depth and moral complexity, helping to reinvigorate the genre and better enable it to grapple with the socio-political concerns of the Cold War era. By **Graham Fuller**



The shift in sensibility that darkened and reoriented the Hollywood western when, tentatively at first, it entered its 'psychological' phase in the 1940s can be illustrated by contrasting two images of John Wayne – from *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956) – which are separated by 17 years and a cataclysmic era in American life.

In *Stagecoach*, John Ford introduced Wayne's Ringo Kid spinning his Winchester in his right hand to flag down the Lordsburg-bound stage, with a dolly shot that loses focus as it becomes a close-up. It shows the worried, sweat-streaked face of a prairie Adonis who has had to shoot his lame horse and been stranded on foot in hostile Apache country; the ominousness in his voice indicates he's not as naive as he looks, but his greeting to the driver is genuinely friendly. Knowing Ringo is travelling to New Mexico Territory to kill three brothers, the marshal riding shotgun arrests him (partly to protect him), but lets him board the coach un-handcuffed. He agrees with the driver that Ringo is a fine boy, which Ringo proves with his chivalrous treatment of the prostitute Dallas (Claire Trevor), who has been ostracised by some of their uppity fellow passengers. When, after much danger, Ringo and Dallas are sent on their way to keep "safe from the blessings of civilisation", he is the same untainted primitive he was at the start.

A dolly shot of Wayne's Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* tells a different story. Seeking his adolescent niece Debbie, who had been abducted by Comanche seven years previously, Ethan arrives at a fort following the 7th Cavalry's destruction of a Comanche camp. After he has asked to see the rescued female settlers, he and his part-Indian 'nephew' Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) are taken to the chapel where they see a deranged middle-aged woman (Ruth Clifford), clearly grieving for her long dead baby, and two girls Debbie's age who are clinging to each other – one scared, the other grinning and chuckling inanely. Implicitly, the insanity of these three blonde – thus emphatically white – women owes to them having been raped repeatedly in captivity. After Ethan dismisses the recovered captives as no longer white but "Comanch", he turns away, then looks back sharply at Clifford mewling over the doll, the camera closing in quickly on his face, which, half-shaded by the brim of his hat, burns with hatred.

What sets this shot and the one of Ringo hailing the stagecoach apart is not simply the difference between a tormented 50-something nomad's calcified rage and a young outlaw's apprehension, but the psychological context. Beyond giving Ringo the need to avenge his father and brother's murders, there's no evidence that Ford or *Stagecoach*'s writer Dudley Nichols gave a jot about his inner life. In contrast, Ethan's fury at the sight of white women he considers defiled can be attributed to old grievances, such as the Comanche chief Scar's killing of Martin's mother, and his more recent traumatisation by the rape and murder of his sister-in-law Martha, with whom he was mutually in love, and his older niece Lucy. Though Ethan is a racist bigot, he is troubled by more than Martha's violation by Indians in the moments before her death. To protect himself from the guilt he feels over his sexual passion for her and his absence from his brother Aaron's ranch when he and Martha were slain, he directs his rage at another taboo – miscegenation. He pledges to kill Debbie who, as one of Scar's wives, is as polluted in Ethan's eyes as the women at the fort (and as was the dying Martha). He doesn't kill Debbie, of course, but takes her home. He leaves her with Martin and the Jorgensen family, not to be "safe from the blessings of civilisation", but because civilisation – particularly in the form of a home in which Debbie provides a constant reminder of her mother – has no place for him.

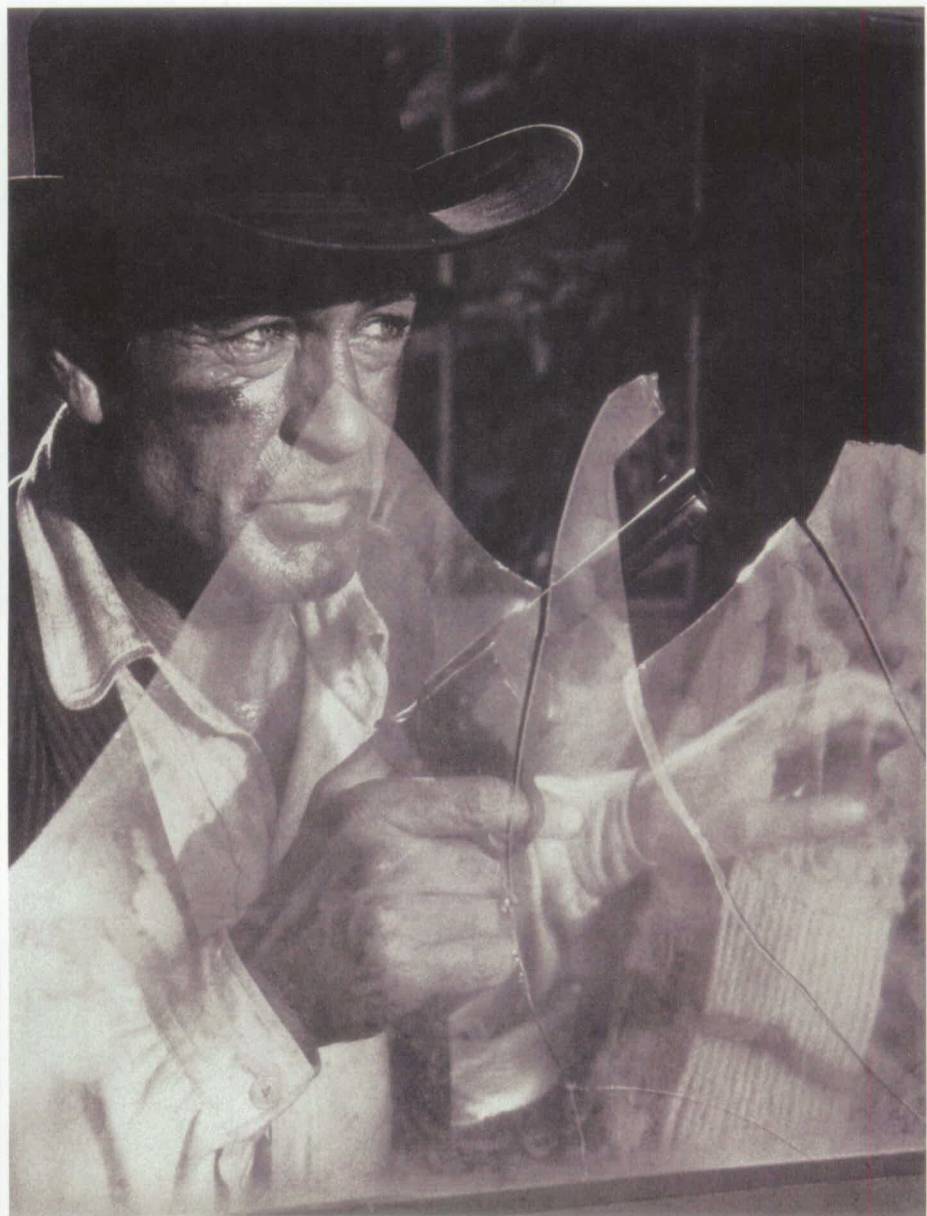
Like Howard Hawks's Oedipally themed *Red River* (1947), *The Searchers* – which has also been interpreted as a Cold War allegory – is a hybrid of traditionalist western and psychological western that shows how anxieties about America's post-war realities had seeped into a genre that had hitherto celebrated nation-building. Two of Hawks and Ford's old-school contemporaries had been instrumental earlier in expanding the western's remit to incorporate social and adult themes. William Wellman's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) had indicted mob rule. Raoul

Walsh's *Pursued* (1947), which reflected the popularisation of Freudian theory in post-war American culture, depicted the unburying of its war veteran's repressed childhood trauma. Both films showed the stylistic, thematic and iconographic influence of *film noir*, as did King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946), André de Toth's *Ramrod* (1947), Robert Wise's *Blood on the Moon* (1948) and Anthony Mann's *Devil's Doorway* (1950), the least sentimental of the period's pro-Native American films.

The western's origin in the frontier drama – the conquest of land and the suppression of indigenous tribes in the name of Manifest Destiny, the transformation of the wilderness into a garden – may explain why, as a primarily outdoors genre, it lagged behind *film noir* in mirroring the social malaise and anti-communist paranoia of the late 1940s. Retrospectively, it could be seen that the era of the psychological western, from *The Ox-Bow Incident* through Arthur Penn's *The Left Handed Gun* (1958), Marlon Brando's *One-Eyed Jacks* (1960), Robert Aldrich's *The Last Sunset* (1961), and Ford's regretful *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) overlapped with and lasted as long as the classic *noir* period, which ran from *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) and *High Sierra* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958). The western only evolved into an established vehicle for contemporary socio-political commentary and psychological characterisation once specific milieus had been identified which could offer a microcosm through which to explore the elements of conflict. In fact, two such milieus and an aesthetic heavily influenced by the Hollywood melodrama eventually facilitated this development.

The success of Henry King's *The Gunfighter* (1950) and Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) led to the revitalisation of 'town terror' or 'law and order' westerns that probed the meaning of violence, of courage and cowardice, in a community setting. *High Noon*, famously, was an allegory of the McCarthy communist witch-hunts, as were Allan Dwan's *Silver Lode* (1954), Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954), Ray Milland's *A Man Alone* (1955) and Edward Dmytryk's *Warlock* (1959), while Robert D. Webb's *The Proud Ones* (1956), Mann's *The Tin Star* (1957) and Delmer Daves's *3:10 to Yuma* (1958) followed *High Noon* in decrying the greed and self-interest that the Red Scare had illuminated.

Anxieties about America's post-war realities began to seep into a genre that had hitherto celebrated nation-building



Lone star: Gary Cooper as Sheriff Will Kane, left alone by the craven townsfolk of Hadleyville to fight against a murderous gang in *High Noon* (1952)

Though *Johnny Guitar*, *Warlock* and *3:10 to Yuma* were more psychologically sophisticated than these other westerns in terms of their internal dynamics – *The Proud Ones* was a conventional precursor to *Rio Bravo* (1958) – they all probed fissures in the American national psyche. So, too, did George Stevens's *Shane* (1952). In self-consciously romanticising Alan Ladd's professional gunman as the knightly angel of death who serves the democracy of small farmers against the greedy capitalist Ryker, Stevens reconstructed the myths that the noir-influenced *The Gunfighter* had bleakly debunked.

In its stylisation, *Shane* was an Olympian variation on the psychological law-and-order western, yet it wasn't as radical as Ray's baroque *Johnny Guitar* (see 'Westward the women', page 46), which reversed traditional gender roles and drew on theatricalism, film noir, the musical, the woman's picture and the romance movie in its denunciation of McCarthyite paranoia and hysteria and in its complex critiques of capitalism, progressivism, feminism and the inextinguishable and illusory nature of love. It was preceded by two previous baroque westerns with powerful female protagonists, Mann's Electra complex melodrama *The Furies* (1950) – adapted like *Duel in the Sun* from a Niven Busch novel – and Fritz Lang's Brechtian Holocaust allegory *Rancho Notorious* (1952). *The Furies* and *Johnny Guitar* also anticipated Samuel Fuller's gothic *Forty Guns* (1957), which itself presaged the spaghetti western.

The most consistently successful directors of psychological westerns were Anthony Mann and Budd Boetticher. Each made a cycle of harsh morality tales that require middle-aged loners to complete revenge missions or other punishing searches for justice. Mann's five westerns with James Stewart – *Winchester '73* (1950), *Band of the River* (1951), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *The Far Country* (1954) and *The Man from Laramie* (1955)

John Wayne as the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (1939)

– exhaust their ambiguous, self-doubting and self-scouring heroes. The baleful wilderness of these films, which can include warlike Indians, gives the journeys of Stewart's obsessives a metaphysical depth. Their ordeals demand that they confront villains who brutalise them – the point-blank shooting of Will Lockhart's gunman in *The Man from Laramie*, for example, surpasses in cruelty Quentin Tarantino's postmodern atrocities – and who reflect back to them their crippling neuroses. This then elicits their own desire for cathartic violence, even if, in the cases of *The Naked Spur* and *The Man from Laramie*, they show a capacity to resist it.

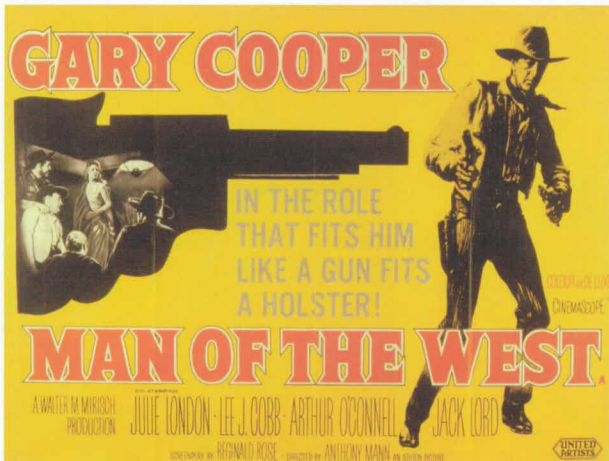
Less unstable but more frightening than Stewart's self-hating cynics is the Mann hero who re-embraces violence in *Man of the West* (1958). Played by Gary Cooper because Mann thought Stewart would be unsuitable, Link Jones cannot bring himself to strangle one of his cousins for humiliating a woman, but he beats him up and then shoots his other cousin and his rapist uncle (Lee J. Cobb), who raised them all and mentored Link as a robber and killer – but who must be eliminated so society can regenerate itself healthily. In his transformation from clumsy retiree to born-again killer and purger

Wayne as Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956)

of evil, Link foreshadows Clint Eastwood's William Munny in *Unforgiven* (1992).

Boetticher's seven Randolph Scott films – often known as the Ranown Cycle: *Seven Men from Now* (1956), *The Tall T* (1957), *Decision at Sundown* (1957), *Buchanan Rides Alone* (1958), *Westbound* (1958), *Ride Lonesome* (1959) and *Comanche Station* (1959) – vindicate the necessary violence of the star's iron stoicism and restore its equilibrium, but do not leave the characters spiritually or materially better off, or under any illusion that the world has become a much better place for the eradication of a few bad men. Stewart's bounty hunter Howard Kemp in *The Naked Spur* is humanised by a woman, who becomes his reward for relinquishing the bounty he would have earned for dishonourably turning in a wanted man. However, the woman Scott's Pat Brennan sexually empowers and puts an arm around at the end of *The Tall T* will not, in the self-contained world of the Boetticher-Scott westerns, alter his essential aloneness. Scott's heroes are forced to act because "there are just some things a man can't ride around", but it is their inescapable fate – as it is for Shane, Ethan Edwards, *Warlock's* Clay Blaisdell, and *Johnny Guitar* once he has tired of Vienna – to ride lonesome.

i The films below are screening at BFI Southbank, London, in May as part of the *Sight & Sound* Deep Focus programme 'Ride Lonesome: The Psychological Western'. A video essay by Tag Gallagher on *Pursued* will be available to view later this month at bfi.org.uk/sightandsound

Natural born killer: in *Man of the West* (1958) Gary Cooper's Link Jones re-embraces his violent side

1 *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)

Producer David O. Selznick co-scripted Niven Busch's story himself in an attempt to replicate the success of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and make a star of his mistress Jennifer Jones, while showing her off as the libidinous half Indian Pearl Chavez. One long flashback, the most commercially successful western of all owes a debt to *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) for its nostalgia – not for the post-Civil War omnipotence of the Texas cattle baron Senator McCanless (Lionel Barrymore), who is symbolically emasculated and unable to withstand progress (the railroad), but for a golden age of sexual pleasure. Even more than Welles's butchered masterpiece, Selznick's sexual pipedream is abstracted from historical reality by its biblical aura – rendered through its expressionistic Technicolor cinematography – and De Mille-like luridness.

Like *Gone with the Wind*, *Duel* centres on its heroine's rational love for a mild-mannered man, the civic-minded Jesse McCandles (Joseph Cotten), who takes after his genteel mother Laura Belle (Lillian Gish) rather than his father, and her passion for a brute, the prodigal Lewt (Gregory Peck), Jesse's younger brother. Taking licence from Jane Russell's carnal display in *The Outlaw* (1943) and drawing on the miscegenation of *Wuthering Heights*' Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, Pearl and Lewt's feverish mixed-race lust was presented with cheerful hypocrisy, as a sinfulness to be morally condemned and punished by death in an ostensibly racist and pro-patriarchal western melodrama. Selznick was having his cake and eating it, too: Lewt's infernal dynamism and Pearl's wantonness are infinitely more attractive than the neutered social conformism of Jesse and his railroad heiress fiancée (Joan Tetzel). Their *amour fou* is also more psychologically complex than Scarlett and Rhett's novelistic romance. Pearl and Lewt are damaged goods: she the daughter of a promiscuous Native American woman murdered by her effete white father; he a psychopath ruined by the senator's indulgence.

Though ravished into emotional dependency by Lewt (as Scarlett was by Rhett), Pearl proves his equal in insatiability, as indicated by her reckless riding and compulsive stroking of horses' heads (an extended Freudian metaphor not as visually crass as it sounds). Unlike Scarlett, Pearl is untameable – and Lewt ultimately becomes her prey.

2 *Pursued* (Raoul Walsh, 1947)

Though *The Ox-Bow Incident* is considered the first psychological western – involving as it does a son relieving his castration anxiety by exposing the inherent weakness of his pathologically cruel father – *Pursued* is the genre's first psychoanalytic entry.

As a boy, Jeb Rand is rescued from the home of his massacred family by Mrs Callum (Judith Anderson), a woman with a shameful secret who brings him up with her son Adam and daughter Thor. As adults, Jeb (Robert Mitchum) and Thor (Teresa Wright) are in love, which incites incestuous sexual jealousy in Adam (John Rodney). Tormented by nightmares in which he is menaced by his murdered father's potentially emasculating spurs, Jeb tells Mrs Callum that he'll find someone to answer the questions that "keep coming back" to him if she won't; a visit to a decayed dwelling – his old home – in the New Mexico hills has prompted his need to un-repress his childhood memories.

In making Jeb a wounded hero of the 1898 Spanish-American War, Niven Busch (who wrote *Pursued* as a vehicle for Wright, his wife) implicitly addressed the rehabilitation problems faced by traumatised World War II vets, as he did directly in his 1944 novel *Their Dream of Home*; irrespective of the source of Jeb's PTSD, Busch's prescription of some kind of Freudian talking cure is sincere, notwithstanding its unavailability in the rural southwest of the 1900s. Anticipating the ordeals of the neurotic heroes in the hostile terrains of Anthony Mann's James Stewart westerns, Walsh gave visual expression to Jeb's paranoia in his rides past the cliff-face



Angel of death: Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck in King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)

of a towering butte, emblematic of the psychic wall he must break through. Since *Pursued* was designed like a *film noir*, however, its *mise-en-scène* is predominantly claustrophobic. Walsh fretted that the cinematographer James Wong Howe's elaborate camera set-ups would delay the film's completion, but integrating shadowy interiors and daunting rock edifices in the same fatalistic drama came naturally to the veteran director of gangster drama *High Sierra* (1941), a film he would remake as a western, *Colorado Territory* (1949). Such extreme environments reflect the existential entrapment of each film's troubled hero.

3 *I Shot Jesse James* (Samuel Fuller, 1949)

Fuller's noirish directorial debut is both a piercing study of the emotional disarray of Jesse James's killer Robert Ford (John Ireland) and an ambiguous gay text, one more playful than Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007). Fuller

Samuel Fuller's noirish 'I Shot Jesse James' is both a piercing study of James's killer and an ambiguous gay text



Raoul Walsh's *Pursued* (1947)

approved of Ford, who shot his gang leader James in 1882, because, the filmmaker said, "Jesse James was a half-assed homo who impersonated a girl for Quantrill's Raiders when he was 15. Acting as a hooker, he enticed soldiers into a little shack called The House of Love, where these bastard raiders would kill and rob them."

Fuller covertly indicates at the start that James (Reed Hadley) and his houseguest Ford are having an affair that has incensed James's careworn wife. He comforts Ford physically after he's wounded during a bank raid and asks him to rub his back when he's bathing. In a nocturnal scene, James moves into a penetrative position directly behind Ford – divided though they are by a window – when he's skulking outdoors. Ford shoots James in the back shortly afterward to get a \$10,000 reward and an amnesty so he can marry his actress girlfriend, Cynthia (Barbara Britton), but Fuller implies Ford was acting on the sexual confusion James had provoked in him.

Regarded as a pariah, Ford ratchets up his self-loathing and Cynthia's disgust by re-enacting the murder on stage; the juvenile theatregoer who subsequently tries to shoot him "to become the biggest gunman in the country" foreshadows the glory-seeking punks pulling guns on quick-draw Jimmy Ringo in *The Gunfighter* (1950).



Samuel Fuller's *I Shot Jesse James* (1949)

Consumed with guilt and troubled by Cynthia's equivocations, Ford heads from Missouri to Colorado to make his fortune prospecting so they can marry, and shares a hotel room with John Kelley (Preston Foster), his rival for her; they clean their guns together in a homoerotic scene that parodies Ireland and Montgomery Clift's cowboys handling each other's revolvers in *Red River*. A shot of Ford waking and looking with distaste at the unseen far side of his bed prefigures the admission by the effeminate hotel clerk that he, not Kelley, stole Cynthia's wedding ring from him "after you went to sleep that night". Ford's fate is inevitable.

If Fuller's comment on James's days as a female impersonator is as homophobic as it sounds, he still demonstrates compassion and tolerance by having Ford finally reveal that he loved James.

4 *The Gunfighter* (Henry King, 1950)
André de Toth devised *The Gunfighter* story as a self-conscious deconstruction of the mythic archetype of "the fastest gun in the West", itself a Hollywood construct, but also a correlative of America's place in the Atomic Age.

The once wild Jimmy Ringo (Gregory Peck) regrets his violent past and wants to settle down with his wife Peggy (Helen Westcott) and their young son. He seeks them out in Cayenne, Texas, where Peggy has become the schoolmarm under an assumed name and Jimmy's former fellow robber Mark Strett (Millard Mitchell) has gone straight as the marshal.

Named after Johnny Ringo, a volatile enemy of Wyatt Earp and his brothers, Jimmy was also informed by the experiences of de Toth's friends Errol Flynn, Humphrey Bogart and the boxer Joe Louis, who were routinely challenged to fights by hotshots saying, "You don't look so tough." Jimmy is similarly entrapped by notoriety – recognised in every town he drifts through, he is forced into a duel by a "squirt" who wants his mantle. He must unwillingly demonstrate his prowess, racking up his body count, or die trying to survive.

"The big gunny" who fancies his chances against him in Cayenne is baby-faced Hunt Bromley (Skip Homeier), whose downy upper lip and flashy outfit contrast with Jimmy's thick moustache and sombre clothes. The opposition between weary veteran and cocky aspirant pits the authentic West against its mythical counterpart and the serious western against the glamorised B western. King's masterstroke was not to play it out as a fair fight before the audience of schoolboys and adult sensation-seekers gathered in front of the saloon where Jimmy waits. Instead, Bromley ingloriously ambushes him behind the building, the killing destroying Jimmy's hopes of redemption.

The larger context is the disillusioning reality that America's military prowess and assumption of moral authority at the start of the Cold War have not ensured national security, but made it the biggest and most susceptible target on the world stage.

5 *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952)
The documentary-like picture that launched the 1950s cycle of town-taming westerns was a revision of John Ford's ultra-conservative



To kill or not to kill: James Stewart in Anthony Mann's *The Naked Spur* (1953)

The Manichean struggle that characterised Anthony Mann's westerns was rendered most starkly in 'The Naked Spur'

My Darling Clementine (1946). It reconfigured Ford's complacent, racist Wyatt Earp as the egalitarian, conscientious Sheriff Will Kane (Gary Cooper), the romantically morose Doc Holliday as Kane's thuggish antagonist Frank Miller (Ian MacDonald), the passive Boston schoolmarm Clementine Carter as Kane's brave Quaker bride Amy (Grace Kelly), and the disposable Mexican prostitute Chihuahua as the forceful Mexican businesswoman Helen Ramírez (Katy Jurado). On his and Amy's wedding day, Kane is abandoned by Hadleyville's craven menfolk to fight alone against Miller – a released killer seeking revenge on Kane for his incarceration – and his three henchmen. Amy, too, deserts Kane; it takes Helen, his one-time lover, to explain to her why he has no choice but to defend the town and himself.

It is no longer fashionable for *High Noon* to be regarded solely as an allegory of the McCarthy witch-hunts, but the notion that Carl Foreman's script, which drew on *The Virginian* (1929) and

John W. Cunningham's story *The Tin Star* (1947), is ideologically multivalent is suspect; the right-wing theory that Kane symbolised an American Cold Warrior purging totalitarian communist or neo-fascists smacks of an attempt to co-opt a film that has been screened in the White House more than any other. Foreman conceived *High Noon* around 1948 as a metaphor for the United Nations. A former communist, he was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee during the film's production and took the Fifth Amendment. "Frightened but inspired," facing ostracism and about to be blacklisted, he recast Kane as a man who, like himself, would not yield to the bullying "political gangsters from out of town" who were decimating careers and lives in Hollywood.

High Noon tragically depicts the failure of democracy: Kane's stand is resisted by the townsmen, who fear killings will alienate potential investors in Hadleyville, and Amy's ultimate denial of her pacifism reinforces Kane's insistence that violence alone can fight violence. The irony of Howard Hawks making *Rio Bravo* as a riposte to *High Noon* – a film denounced by John Wayne as "the most un-American thing I've ever seen" – was that Kane's lone stand appoints him as more of a rugged individualist than Wayne's sheriff, who defends the Texan town's jail with four friends behind him.



Henry King's *The Gunfighter* (1950)



Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952)

6 *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952)

Lang's early westerns *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union* (1941) inhabit a recognisably naturalistic frontier. In contrast, *Rancho Notorious*, adapted by Daniel Taradash from a story by Silvia Richards set in 1870s Wyoming, occupies a baroque Technicolor dream space frequently framed within the frame by doorways, pillars and geological formations, so that the relentless search of cowboy Vern Haskell (Arthur Kennedy) for the rapist-murderer of his fiancée literally mimics the unspooling of a film strip and its moment-by-moment entrapment of its doomed characters.

Interpolated verses of a Brechtian ballad recalling a saga of "Hate, murder, and revenge!" distance the viewer from the driven Haskell, as noir-like flashbacks lead him to a jail-cell encounter with the louché Frenchy Fairmont (Mel Ferrer), thence beyond the confines of the law to a haven for outlaws that's named Chuck-a-Luck after a vertical roulette wheel of fate, which provides a visual metaphor for the cinematic apparatus. This refuge – probably suggested by the Butch Cassidy gang's Hole-in-the-Wall cabin in Wyoming – is run by Frenchy's lover, the retired saloon singer Altar Keane (Marlene Dietrich, iconically cast as a fading version of her Weimar cabaret persona and explicitly as the object of Haskell's gaze).

Altar's whitewashing of the crimes that finance her operation and her wearing of a talismanic brooch stolen from Haskell's girl by her killer support critic Walter Metz's theory that *Rancho Notorious* is an allegory of the Holocaust, in which Haskell represents a Nazi hunter, 'Frenchy' a Vichy collaborator, Altar a complicit German who refuses to acknowledge the persecution of the Jews, and the brooch and Chuck-a-Luck's other booty the Jews' stolen property.

Made as *Chuck-a-Luck* for RKO, Lang's western was renamed at Howard Hughes's insistence, while its fragmented narrative was re-edited to follow Haskell's quest in a more conventional style. The thought of the completed work Lang intended is tantalising.

7 *The Naked Spur* (Anthony Mann, 1953)

The Manichaean struggle that characterised Mann's westerns was rendered most starkly in *The Naked Spur*, shot entirely outdoors and limited to the shifting dynamics among five marginalised whites.

The story begins *in medias res* in 1868. Howard Kemp (James Stewart) has tracked Ben Vandergroat (Robert Ryan), wanted for killing a marshal, from Kansas to Montana Territory's metaphysically charged obstacle course of vertiginous crags and rushing rapids. Aided by Jesse Tate (Millard Mitchell), an ageing gold prospector, and Roy Anderson (Ralph Meeker), a cavalry lieutenant disgraced for raping a Blackfeet woman, Howard captures Ben and his girl Lina Patch (Janet Leigh), the daughter of a slain bankrobber.

When Jesse and Roy learn that Howard is not a sheriff but a bounty hunter seeking the \$5,000 on Ben's head, each insists on claiming a third share. Heading to Abilene, the five constitute a sick family, the Machiavellian black sheep



Altar ego: Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious* (1952) can be read as an allegory of the Holocaust

playing on his captors' weaknesses to drive them apart. He tempts Jesse with a non-existent gold stake and uses innocent Lina as sexual bait to alienate Roy and Howard, not realising she's attracted by Howard's homesteading values. The group's perfunctory massacre of 12 Blackfeet suggests that, as ambassadors of Nature, the Native Americans are expendable in the restoration of the cosmic order that will come with Howard's redemption. If he ever exhibited the greed and priapism that ruined Jesse and Roy, he has suppressed those neuroses. His affinity with Ben is suggested by their wearing check garments and by Ben handing Howard his grub – only to contrive his fall over a precipice.

Howard's self-loathing stems from the fact that his fiancée Mary sold his ranch and absconded with the proceeds and her lover while Howard was

fighting in the Civil War. He became a mercenary to prolong his purgatory unconsciously, masochism being the *sine qua non* of Mann's Stewart heroes; his continuing vulnerability is indicated by his being frequently photographed from behind. Finding Lina (who later triggers his prelapsarian dream about Mary) with Ben induces Howard's moral crisis because they reinvolve the torment that resulted from Mary's betrayal, which had presumably reawakened vestigial Oedipal anxieties. To kill or not to kill Ben becomes the question that determines Howard's fate.

8 *Track of the Cat* (William Wellman, 1954)

Wellman's atypical western, his second adapted from a novel by the Nevada writer Walter Van Tilburg Clark following *The Ox-Bow Incident*, was produced by John Wayne's

company and featured Hedda Hopper's son William in a supporting part. The uneasy anti-communist alliance between Wayne and the rabidly right-wing gossip columnist (touched on in 2015's *Trumbo*) suggests that the scarlet coat worn by the malign rancher Curt Bridges (Robert Mitchum) in *Track of the Cat* – and which glares from Wellman's black-and-white-dominated colour palette – isolates Curt as the Red enemy within or, more plausibly, as the Red Scare personified, his tormented family representing the spooked Hollywood community. He is identified with the black panther he hunts in the snowbound California Sierra, and his spite is as culpable as the unseen beast for inciting the wretched Bridges clan's muted hysteria – though, as an agri-capitalist like *Red River*'s Tom Dunson, he scarcely passes muster as a Party member.

The Ox-Bow Incident condemned mob rule, so the Red Scare interpretation is plausible, not least because *Track of the Cat* was adapted by A.I. Bezzerides, a leftist who had struggled to find work during the McCarthy era. Having previously scripted Nicholas Ray's *On Dangerous Ground* (1950), he crafted for Wellman an analogous psychological drama about corrosive machismo and intolerance – and about the need of those who dwell in the wilderness to honour its codes. The earth-friendly exemplar is the Bridges' Native American hired hand Joe Sam (Carl Switzer), who reports that the panther is preying on cattle in the snowbound foothills. Curt and his gentle eldest brother Arthur (Hopper) set off to kill it, leaving their callow younger brother Harold (Tab Hunter) at home with his poised fiancée Gwen (Diana Lynn), his bitter sister Grace (Teresa Wright), their pathetic English father (Philip Tongue) and their religious bigot of a mother (Beulah Bondi). Pa Bridges being maimed by drink, it is Curt's lust for Gwen and emulational jibes that, echoing Major Teltley's humiliation of his son in *Ox-Bow*, pose the equivalent of an Oedipal threat to Harold, who must himself turn hunter.

9 *3:10 to Yuma* (Delmer Daves, 1957)

Though *Duel in the Sun* had celebrated "lust in the dust", Daves's *3:10 to Yuma*, expanded by writer Halsted Welles from a terse Elmore Leonard story, was the first western to suggest that non-marital sex is a normal part of life for consenting adults, if more so in the 1950s than in the frontier era, when Victorian morality coexisted with organised prostitution. The hookup between the outlaw leader Ben Wade (Glenn Ford) and the lonely barmaid Emmy (Felicia Farr) in a saloon in Bisbee, Arizona,



Budd Boetticher's *The Tall T* (1957)



William Wellman's *Track of the Cat* (1954)

In 'Track of the Cat' Robert Mitchum's Curt is the Red Scare personified and his family are the spooked Hollywood community

satisfies both without creating romantic expectations in them or the audience, or inducing a sense of sin. Though Emmy first broaches the idea of them going to bed, their fleeting affair establishes Wade as an arch seducer. This becomes relevant in his later dealings with the poor farmer charged with guarding him after his arrest. Dan Evans (Van Heflin) and his two sons had earlier stood by while Wade inexplicably shot one of his own gunmen and a stagecoach driver during a holdup, after which Evans was rebuked by his wife Alice (Leora Dana) for failing to take action.

Desperate to finance the irrigation of his parched land and to restore his manhood in Alice's eyes, Evans seizes the chance to earn the \$200 offered to bring Wade in handcuffs to the Yuma prison via stopovers at Evans's place – where Wade sweet-talks the careworn Alice – and in a bridal suite in Contention City, from where the 3:10 train will leave. Playing cat and mouse, Wade tempts Evans with increasingly high bribes to make a Faustian bargain to release him.

High Noon was influential here: the cowardice of the Bisbee posse and Contention deputies asked to help bring Wade to justice is a residue of witch-hunt paranoia. The film is too humorous to be considered a western noir, though DP Charles Lawton Jr brought noirish claustrophobia to the hotel sequence and used long shadows to suggest the Evanses are entrapped by the arid land. Daves's westerns are subtly humanistic, and 3:10 allows for Wade's redemption. His final self-sacrifice, though born of respect for Evan's grit and compassion for Alice, remains ambiguous.



Boetticher's *Ride Lonesome* (1959)



Delmer Daves's *3:10 to Yuma* (1957)

10 *The Tall T* (Budd Boetticher, 1957)

Ride Lonesome (Boetticher, 1959)

Boetticher had been a toreador, so it is telling that his *Seven Men from Now* (1956) and the six Rawlins Cycle westerns that followed are contests of guile between unequal forces: Randolph Scott's strategically agile loners on one hand, and the unpredictable villains who outgun him on the other. *The Tall T* and *Ride Lonesome* are spare, wry morality plays about masculine conduct, written by Burt Kennedy (as were *Seven Men from Now* and *Comanche Station*; each ignites at a swing station, the portal to a testing ground – deserts, gulches, clustered granite boulders, decrepit man-made structures – so divorced from civilisation that each character is answerable only to his or her conscience.

In *The Tall T*, adapted from an Elmore Leonard story, ramrod-turned-rancher Pat Brennan must rescue himself and a cruelly abandoned middle-aged bride (Maureen O'Sullivan) from the killers (Richard Boone, Henry Silva, Skip Homeier) of three of his friends; the task entails pressing the woman to drop her virgin act.

In *Ride Lonesome*, bounty hunter Ben Brigade is forced by marauding Mesquiteros to travel with the station keeper's deserted wife (Karen Steele), and outlaws Sam Boone (Pernell Roberts) and Whit (James Coburn), who intend to trade his captive (James Best) for amnesty. Brigade doesn't seek the bounty but wants instead to avenge the hanging of his wife by the captive's pursuing brother after forcing him into the open; Boetticher subverted the role of the defenceless beauty who taxes the men's self-discipline, by having her question the hero's mercenary nature. Defined by his individualism and spare, blunt manner of communication, the Scott character is a reactive player in the frontier farce, a man against whom charismatic talkers such as Boone's Frank Usher and Robert's Boone measure themselves. Having subsisted on crime instead of making the existential choice to graft on the land, each of these feckless men invites the hero's scepticism by claiming he wants to own a ranch. Whereas Frank is unable to renounce violence, Sam and Whit appear ready to settle down at the end of *Ride Lonesome*, thus becoming part of the historical process that Boetticher's pithy microcosmic westerns seldom explicitly acknowledge.

11 *Day of the Outlaw* (André de Toth, 1959)

Renouncing violence is the central theme in the last of the 11 westerns directed by the Hungarian émigré de Toth. Possibly an allegory

of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the black-and-white *Day of the Outlaw*, adapted by Philip Yordan (*Johnny Guitar*) from Lee E. Wells's novel, exerts greater fascination as a pacifist alternative to *Shane's* mythifying of the gunfighter.

Like George Stevens's classic, it is set during the Johnson County War between cattle barons and the small farmers who were fencing off Wyoming's open range. It privileges the perspective not of a homesteader like *Shane's* Joe Starrett but that of cattleman Blaise Starrett (Robert Ryan), whose rancorous defence of his right to run his cattle on the range, based on his having helped to purge the territory's human vermin, closely echoes Rufus Ryker's justification in *Shane*. Though Blaise is a responsible member of the 20-strong town of Bitters, bleakly snowbound in the dead of winter, he is prepared to kill the eastern farmer Hal Crane (Alan Marshal) to prevent the erection of his barbed-wire fences. His hatred of the man is stoked by his passion for Crane's wife Helen (Tina Louise), who offers to renew their affair if he spares her husband.

The feud is sidelined by the seizure of Bitters by seven bank robbers. Jack Bruhn (Burl Ives), the gang's mortally wounded leader, effects a psychological transformation in Blaise: first, he is struck by how the disciplinarian ex-army captain stops his vilest men from abusing Bitters' four women; second, when Bruhn admits he ordered the 1857 Mormon massacre of emigrants in Utah, Blaise realises he is tormented by the memory. As several gang members enact a frenzied simulacrum of mass rape (parodying Blaise's illicit passion for Helen) at the dance Bruhn permits, Blaise contrives to eliminate the thugs among them, without using his gun, by leading them away from the pursuing cavalry into the impassable mountains. (The bravura sequence, photographed by Russell Harlan, inspired *The Hateful Eight's* opening.) Like *Shane*, Blaise relinquishes the woman he loves, but he intends to remain in Bitters, his mastering of his violent impulses and selfish sensuality serving the greater good.



Red heat: Edward Dmytryk's *Warlock* (1959) offers an elaborate allegory of McCarthyism

12 *Warlock* (Edward Dmytryk, 1959)

The last event western of the 1950s brought the genre's engagement with McCarthyism to its high-water mark, but Dmytryk's counter-mythic approach to his allegory – more labyrinthine than *High Noon's* or *Johnny Guitar's* – cost *Warlock* popular acclaim and canonical status.

Adapted by Robert Alan Aurthur from Oakley Hall's veiled *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* novel, *Warlock* was Dmytryk's justification for becoming the only member of the Hollywood Ten to recant on his non-cooperation with HUAC in 1947. Blacklisted after serving prison time and believing he had been manipulated by the Communist Party, Dmytryk reappeared

before HUAC in 1951, confessed his 1944-45 party membership, and named 26 previously identified witnesses. His onscreen director's credit identifies him with Johnny Gannon (Richard Widmark) as he rides apart from the other cowboys heading from Abe McQuown's ranch to the prosperous town of Warlock for their habitual rampage. The local leaders send the Wyatt Earp-like vigilante gunman Clay Blaisdell (Henry Fonda) to end the cowboys' reign of terror. He and his compadre Tom Morgan (Anthony Quinn) – their relative masculine strengths denoted via Freudian symbolism – quell the cowboys without drawing blood.

After Gannon breaks with McQuown (Tom Drake) to become Warlock's legally appointed deputy, the film evolves into an analysis of who should police insurgents in America. Blaisdell is the authoritarian HUAC investigator to Gannon's moderate officer of the people. No ignoble McCarthyite, Blaisdell mentors the wounded Gannon on the eve of the climactic showdown with McQuown, but Morgan prevents him from backing the deputy with his gun. A crippled and corrupt amalgam of Doc Holliday and (as noted by film historian Michael Coyne) McCarthy's shady legal counsel Roy Cohn, Morgan hopes McQuown will kill Gannon, who has become involved with the sometime prostitute (Dorothy Malone), whom Morgan loves obsessively. Morgan also needs to preserve Blaisdell so they can maintain their legendary sway as the fascistic scourge of the West and seemingly because there is a sublimated sexual bond between them. But their day is over. The townsmen and McQuown's go-between rally to Gannon's side when he confronts the cowboys. In showing the restoration of law and order through democracy, *Warlock* figuratively picks up and dusts off the sheriff's badge Will Kane dropped contemptuously in *High Noon*. ☪



The place beyond the pines: Robert Ryan as Blaise Starrett in André de Toth's *Day of the Outlaw* (1959)

WESTWARD THE WOMEN

There's never been anything quite like Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar*, but many other westerns of the era also found great roles for women

By Imogen Sara Smith

It starts like any other western, with a lone man riding along a rocky trail. Before the scene can settle into a familiar rhythm, explosions blast through the mountains and workmen swarm around the falling debris. Then gunshots echo, and the rider stops to look down in the valley where robbers are attacking a stagecoach. His face is eerily blank as he watches a body fall. Darkening the ominous mood, a dust-storm dims the air. Soon after, the stranger bursts into a palatial saloon, branded 'Vienna's' and the delicious spell of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) is cast.

This saloon is one of cinema's great spaces: a cavernous, church-shaped room with a sleek design that is more mid-century modern than Old West. The warm, rich colours of polished wood and rough-hewn red rock are set off by gleams of green on the eye-shades of the dealers who stand sentinel beside their empty tables. Surveying her domain from a second-floor balcony, Vienna (Joan Crawford) is dressed all in black like a gunfighter, with tight trousers, a man's shirt, short hair and a gunbelt slung rakishly around her hips. She stands ramrod straight and gives clipped orders, her face grimly set.

"Never met a woman who was more a man," one of the dealers says of her, walking towards the camera as though he were addressing us, the audience. "She thinks like one, acts like one, and sometimes makes me feel I'm not."



Crawford and Hayden in *Johnny Guitar* (1954)

Johnny Guitar revolves around a feud between Vienna, who counts on getting rich when the railroad being built through the mountains turns her isolated saloon into a bustling town, and Emma (Mercedes McCambridge), who owns the local bank and who leads a posse to lynch her rival. Their behaviour affirms the general rule

Westerns may be an essentially masculine genre, but Ray's film reveals the flamboyance and anxiety in that masculinity

that in order for women, who are traditionally marginal in westerns, to take more prominent roles, they must act like men. (This principle is taken to cringe-inducing extremes in William Wellman's 1951 *Westward the Women*, which celebrates the hardness of female pioneers with an undercurrent of misogyny: compared to livestock as they are driven across the continent to marry men they have never seen, the ladies win grudging admiration for their ability to shoot, holler at mule teams, fight with their fists and rough it like men.) *Johnny Guitar* famously climaxes in a distaff gunfight – not the first: Joan Leslie as a saloon owner and Audrey Totter as an outlaw face off in Allan Dwan's loopy *Woman They Almost Lynched* (1953), set in a Civil War border town run by a tough female mayor.

Westerns may be an essentially masculine genre, but Ray's androgynous, operatic film reveals the flamboyance and feverish anxiety ingrained in that masculinity. With its theatrical speeches and stagey confrontations, its gorgeously coordinated colours – red rock and fire and copper and Johnny's whiskey-hued jacket – the film is as stylised as a Douglas Sirk melodrama. But stylisation, ritual and melodramatic heightening are always a large part of westerns' appeal. Survival in the cinematic West depends on performance, and westerns' intense scrutiny of how men move, their mannerisms, bodies and clothes, subjects males to a gaze at once desiring and judgemental. François Truffaut compared *Johnny Guitar* to *Beauty and the Beast* – Beauty, of course, being Sterling Hayden in the title role.

The long, marvellous opening sequence in Vienna's is a fluid, often funny series of contests and showdowns, fuelled by envy and jealousy and each person's need to prove himself, or measure herself against another. Vienna holds off an angry mob with a gun and a showy speech. Johnny, a newly arrived stranger, is goaded into a fist-fight and challenged to prove his prowess on the guitar. Young Turkey (Ben Cooper) tries to prove he's a man by showing off his shooting, and Johnny blasts the gun out of his hand. But the most intense rivalry is between the two women, and though Vienna taunts Emma for being jealous over an outlaw called the Dancin' Kid (Scott Brady), her diagnosis ("You want the Kid, and you're so ashamed you want him dead") seems even more descriptive of Emma's feelings toward Vienna – a kind of explosive, erotic hatred matched only by Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck in *Duel in the Sun* (1946).

McCambridge's performance maintains a steady pitch of barely repressed hysteria: with her shrill voice, bared teeth, and tiny eyes glittering with sadistic joy, she's a grotesque figure of single-minded hate who finally repels even her followers. Joan Crawford, closing in on 50 and on the self-parody that took over her final years on screen, is none the less a far more complex figure, in whom brittle toughness masks stinging hurt, rage wells under polished poise, and a soft heart coexists with a demonic will. *Johnny Guitar* was written for Crawford (originally a novel by Roy Chanslor, the script was credited to Philip Yordan but heavily revised by Ray), and she tyrannised the production with her demands and insecurity.

A surprise hit on its release, *Johnny Guitar*



Hang 'em high: Mercedes McCambridge as the owner of the bank who leads a posse against Vienna



Oh Vienna: Joan Crawford plays the strong-willed saloon keeper in Nicholas Ray's operatic, melodramatic *Johnny Guitar*

has become a cinephile touchstone, especially revered by the directors of the French New Wave. Lyrical intensity and inspired lunacy charge both its big moments, like the indelible image of Vienna in a billowing white dress playing the piano while a lynch mob seethes around her; and its small moments, like the deft flourish with which Johnny catches a whiskey glass as it rolls off the bar. This is one of those rapturous, intoxicating movies that seems at times to be primarily about its own movie-ness.

If there was nothing else quite like *Johnny Guitar*, there were many post-war and 1950s westerns that trampled the boundaries of the genre. Psychological westerns turned away from the sweep of history and unquestioning celebration of pioneer virtues to focus on inner conflicts and a more troubled, ambivalent view of the West. *Noir* westerns laid bare the dark side of those frontier virtues: self-reliance curdles into anti-social selfishness, and wide-open spaces represent not opportunity and freedom, but a vacuum filled by greed and obsession and lust for absolute power. These films increasingly depict not an unspoiled wilderness but a half-civilised West already corrupted by money, whether gold dug from the ground or bills piled on a poker table. And with money, women could gain power and move beyond secondary roles as civilisers or victims. They could own saloons and gambling halls, like Vienna or the women played by Jane Greer in *Station West* (1948), Ruth Roman in *The Far Country* (1954) and Rhonda Fleming in *Tennessee's Partner* (1954). They could control ranches, like Veronica Lake in *Rancho Notorious* (1947), Barbara Stanwyck in *The Furies* (1950) and *Forty Guns* (1957), and Marlene Dietrich in *Rancho Notorious* (1952).

Like *Johnny Guitar*, these films are about women who fight hard and bitterly to hold on to the power and autonomy they've gained. In André de Toth's tough-minded but subtle *Rancho*, Lake's character is stubborn, deceitful and unscrupulous, manipulating men and toying with the West's simplistic moral code. But she is also the only person brave enough to stand up to a despotic rancher who terrorises any rival. Stanwyck, who starred in more westerns than any actress of her era, starting as the sharpshooter in the title role of *Annie Oakley* (1935) and ending as the matriarch of television's *The Big Valley* (1965-69), epitomised the exultant triumphs, frustrating limits and high costs of female power. In Anthony Mann's thunderous *The Furies*, with its overtones of Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, Stanwyck flings a pair of scissors at her



Queen of the desert: Barbara Stanwyck in Samuel Fuller's *Forty Guns* (1957)

In Sam Fuller's outrageous 'Forty Guns', Barbara Stanwyck gallops into the film at the head of a private army of men

unwelcome new stepmother and destroys her father with a ruthless financial scheme, yet never becomes a villain. In Samuel Fuller's outrageous *Forty Guns*, she gallops into the film at the head of a private army of men, and is mythologised in song as "a high-riding woman with a whip", though dispiritingly she must meet her match and prove she is "only a woman after all".

In Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious*, Dietrich's imperious, amoral character, who runs a ranch where she hides outlaws in exchange for a percentage of their loot, is ultimately more sympathetic than the rigidly fixated hero played by Arthur Kennedy, who is seeking revenge on

the man who raped and killed his fiancée. This is a film as luridly overheated and brazenly stylised as *Johnny Guitar*, and both centre on women branded by a mysterious past. A classic *noir* theme, the long shadow of the past falls across such westerns as *Pursued* (1947), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *Ride Lonesome* (1959) and *The Hanging Tree* (1959).

At its heart, *Johnny Guitar* is about lovers meeting after five years apart, with an unspecified bitter past behind them, and wondering whether they can start over. In the film's most celebrated scene, alone in the wee hours of a sleepless night, Vienna and Johnny rake over the smouldering coals of their memories. Underscored by melancholy, brooding music, their dialogue has an incantatory rhythm, as though they were quoting lines to one another, speaking out of their private reveries. They are both haunted. He is trying to distance himself from his past as Johnny Logan, an infamous gunfighter – he still has the reflexes and instincts of a killer. She starts to tell him what she had to pay "for every board, plank and beam" of her place, implying it was herself she sold. For her the hurts and humiliations of the past are still raw, something she can taste, but he tells her they should dismiss the years of their separation as unreal, a bad dream. The whole film has the vivid illogic and compulsion of a dream, in which hidden desires, fears and furies are boldly acted out. So intense are the emotions of these women and men, it's as though all the violence, the explosions and flames and flying bullets, were really inside them.

i *Johnny Guitar* is rereleased at BFI Southbank, London, and select cinemas nationwide on 6 May



Dick Powell and Jane Greer in *Station West* (1948)



Barbara Stanwyck in *The Furies* (1950)

PROFILE

ELECTRIC HORSEMEN

Here comes the cavalry: five filmmakers with strikingly strange visions, rescuing Spanish cinema from blandness

By Nicholas Vroman

Over the last few years a new generation of Spanish filmmakers has been producing works decidedly outside the mainstream, pushing new ideas, visions and ways of making and distributing their work. The Spanish film media have already christened this movement *el otro cine español* (the other Spanish cinema). This blossoming has yet to have any significant effects at the box office in Spain. But at cine-clubs, independent cinemas, film festivals and on the internet, its impact is being felt.

While the likes of Albert Serra and Sergio Caballero have been putting Barcelona into the consciousness of global film culture, a quintet of upcoming filmmakers, loosely based in Madrid – Velasco Broca, Ion de Sosa, Chema García Ibarra, Luis López Carrasco and Miguel Llansó – are making their own marks on the world of cinema with strikingly strange and original works. In addition, these fellows collaborate on each other's films, exchanging the roles of producer, director, editor and cinematographer. The video and film curator Xavier García Puerto has jokingly dubbed them "*los cinco jinetes del post-apocalipsis*" – "the five horsemen of the post-apocalypse" – not just because of the way they are sweeping across

the landscape of Spanish cinema, but because of their shared interest in filtering through science fiction their reveries on and criticisms of the Spanish psyche and their homeland's current economic and political malaise.

López Carrasco and de Sosa were students together at ECAM (Madrid Film School) and were neighbours in Madrid and Berlin, where de Sosa now lives. De Sosa was producer and director of photography on López Carrasco's first feature, *El futuro* (2013). López Carrasco ended up producing de Sosa's *Androids Dream* (*Sueñan los androides*, 2014) along with García Ibarra, who he met at the FilMOTECA in Murcia, in the south-east of the country; they brought in Llansó as assistant director. Velasco Broca produced de Sosa's first film, *True Love* (2011) and was editor for Llansó's *Crumbs* (2015). Now López Carrasco is producing Velasco Broca's *Our Friend the Moon*.

López Carrasco started his filmmaking career in the Los Hijos collective, along with fellow ECAM alumni Natalia Martín Sancho and Javier Fernández Vázquez, producing experimental documentaries and short structuralist film explorations. His impressively original feature debut *El futuro* is set some time in the 1980s. It follows an all-night party where a soundtrack of obscure Spanish new wave songs blots out the conversations. You get hints of discussions about terrorism, politics and other issues, but mainly what you see is a bunch of 20-somethings having way too much fun with liquor and drugs. De Sosa's restless, claustrophobic camerawork captures a generation who, coming out from

under the yoke of Francoism, jumped into a brave new world, experimenting with sex, drugs and democracy. The final shots of the morning after are set in the shuttered and dead streets of contemporary Spain. López Carrasco suggests that despite the social, artistic and cultural experimentation of the time, hard political realities and the need for coalition-building were ignored – or drowned out by the new-found sound of freedom. As he says, "This crazy night has lasted 30 years and now you have this feeling of a huge hangover. It's a film about the impossibility of Spanish society building any common future nowadays."

Ion de Sosa spent three years filming *True Love*, a Jonas Mekas-like personal documentary about a year he spent in Germany breaking up with his girlfriend (Marta Bassols, who also acts in *Androids Dream*). His omnivorous diaristic eye marks the seasons, obsessively noting the mundane and the relevant in his rundown neighbourhood, capturing distressed exteriors, sad plots of greenery and roadside median strips, the cafe and the squat where he and his buddies hang out. The film gets so personal you see him getting new tats, fucking his girlfriend and getting a stomach biopsy. You literally see inside him.

His follow-up, *Androids Dream*, is a brilliant take on Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the inspiration for *Blade Runner* (1982). In de Sosa's version, the dystopic modernist urban landscape of Benidorm serves as the backdrop for a psychopathic blade runner who guns down much more human-than-him



Pool of talent: the five horsemen, from left to right, Luis López Carrasco, Miguel Llansó, Velasco Broca, Chema García Ibarra and Ion de Sosa

PHOTOGRAPH BY P. LUCAS FOLK



Luis López Carrasco's *El futuro* (2013)



Miguel Llansó's *Crumbs* (2015)



Ion de Sosa's *Androids Dream* (2014)

replicants. De Sosa's anonymous blade runner is no world-weary Harrison Ford: he's just a killer. His quarries are working-class Joes, a bearish gay guy, a young family – normal people. De Sosa also picks up Dick's main theme of human empathy for other species – sheep in particular – which was mysteriously absent from Ridley Scott's version. Using a 16mm camera, De Sosa pulls out an arsenal of techniques, from a James Benning-like opening sequence, cataloguing building exteriors, to a sequence of hand-held whip pans and rapid-fire editing that harks back to avant-garde master Stan Brakhage's concept of the untutored eye – the idea of looking at filmic images unprejudiced and without expectation. His cold take on the trajectory of his blade runner is a critique not only of the future, but of life in present-day Spain. Terror can and will strike from anywhere. The possibility of maintaining any sort of ostensibly normal, peaceful life is under threat from the heartless agency of the powers that be.

Velasco Broca's short films have something of the character of Guy Maddin's appropriations of an apocryphal lost cinema history but suggest a surrealist lineage that runs from Buñuel to José Val de Omar – to whom he paid homage in his 2010 short *Val del Omar fuera de sus casillas* (*Val del Omar out of His Mind*) – to Velasco Broca. His work not only reimagines a new surrealist cinema, but appropriates freely, and hilariously, from 50s monster movies and television science-fiction. His wit is razor-sharp, his perverse imagination bringing out psychosexual, political and feminist subtexts from seemingly banal material and B-movie tropes. His major work is a trilogy of films known collectively as *Echos der Buchdrucker* (*Echos of the Spine*). They include *Der Milchschorff* (*La Costra Láctea* [Cradle Cap, 2002]) – imagine Buñuel's *Land without Bread* as a sci-fi mystery directed by Fellini; *Kinky Hoodoo Voodoo* (2004) – strange goings-on at a boy's summer camp, where aliens will get you if you are caught looking at naked girls; and *Avant Pétalos Grillados* (2006) – in which crab-clawed aliens prowl a decidedly sterile and hostile world, harvesting body-builders' bodies and throwing babies off roofs.

Chema García Ibarra's films feature a heady mix of sci-fi macguffins and a heartfelt exploration of myths, mysteries and faith. His 2013 *Uranus* is a hilarious, brilliantly constructed and ultimately heartbreaking story with moments of Hitchcock and Herzog. It tells a story of incest, murder, mysticism, family trauma and mysterious pods that have appeared in farmhouses and garages throughout Spain.

Rather than an invasion of body-snatchers, the pods hint at deeper family traumas which are played out and movingly resolved by García Ibarra's barebones production values and his recurring cast of family and friends.

Miguel Llansó, though based in Madrid, spends much of his time in Ethiopia, where he makes most of his films, including short docs and metafictional essays commenting on Ethiopian life. He found his own voice with his 2013 short *Chigger Ale*, a celebration of Ethiopian life and a critique of pop and political culture with a wickedly funny story built around the childish and absurd megalomania of a Hitler wannabe (deliciously played by the diminutive, hunchbacked Daniel Tadesse). He hangs out at a local bar, his petty power-plays constantly resulting in him getting his comeuppance. As he plots his revenge on those who make fun of him, he is suddenly interrupted by a leather-clad dominatrix who takes him into space.

Llansó's first feature, *Crumbs*, continues in Afro-futurist mode: in a post-apocalyptic landscape, a dormant spaceship hovering above the Earth suddenly begins to show signs of life, beckoning our hero, Candy (Tadesse) to "return" to his *Close Encounter* destiny. With its send-up of Joseph Campbellisms, Llansó attacks consumer society through a vision of its detritus littering our future. In his surreal world there are postmodern Nazi Teutonic Knights, reliquaries for Michael Jordan and Santa Claus; eventually, our Candy/Candy returns home to tend his garden.

It's time for us to grow and become people who can pay workers. The actors have to be paid, or we're doing this wrong



Chema García Ibarra's *Uranus* (2013)

Why is this blossoming happening now? Sergio Uguet de Resayre, producer of *Crumbs*, says, "I believe the Spanish talent has always been there, but it is more visible now. The two main reasons are the development of technologies, which allow for the opportunity to create professional works at a fraction of the cost... [and] the diaspora of talent fleeing the country. A lot of us live in countries that support filmmaking. Most of us don't live in Spain. Miguel lives between Spain and Ethiopia. Velasco Broca – Spain, Berlin and India. Ion de Sosa lives in Berlin. I live in Finland. Among my generation of filmmakers there is an awareness about the status quo in Spain, and we have decided to take matters into our own hands."

But while this group of filmmakers is being feted – Velasco Broca's films have been shown at Cannes, García Ibarra's at Sundance, while Llansó's *Crumbs* has won a number of awards and special mentions at film festivals – they are mostly living at the edge of financial stability, working for nothing with volunteer crews. De Sosa, in conversation, said, "We are OK with the underground, but it's time for us to grow and become people who can pay workers. We are producers and directors and we do the movies we want. But people like the camera assistant or the actors – they have to be paid. They have to be paid because if they're not, we're doing this wrong."

The old boys' network of the Spanish film industry is still strong. Government subsidies for film are still going into the pockets of established commercial filmmakers. The struggle to make films, and make a living from them, carries on. But through festival screenings, alternative distribution, funding, word of mouth from savvy film folk – and a blossoming of new talent – the future of Spanish film is looking stronger, more surreal and very interesting indeed. **S**



Velasco Broca's *Kinky Hoodoo Voodoo* (2004)

THE LOOK OF SILENCE

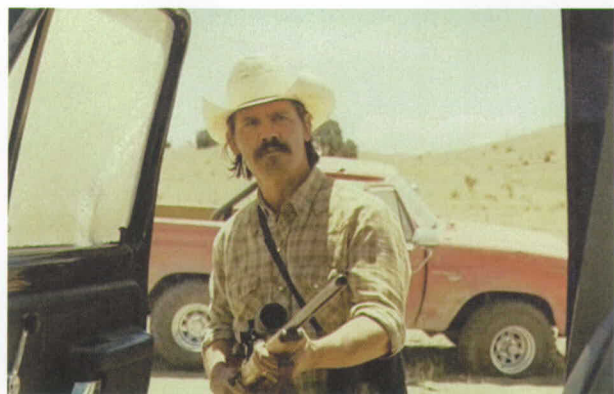
Cinema is an art of noise – words and music, whimpers and bangs. And when the sound stops, the effect can be explosive

By Sam Davies

"A minute's silence can be very long," says Sami Frey as Franz in Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à part* (1964), killing time at a café table with Anna Karina and Claude Brasseur. "A real minute can last an eternity." And with a snip, Godard cuts the background clamour of the café to a deafening zero.

Ten seconds, let alone a minute, of silence is a rare thing in cinema. Nature abhors a vacuum, and filmmakers tend to abhor a silence, rushing to fill it with music or dialogue. Complete silence, in which all sound, even the background hum of traffic or other diegetic noise from within the film's world is shut down, is even rarer. In part this is down to a convention among sound designers that an absolutely silent soundtrack would be mistaken by audiences for a technical malfunction. But it's also the case that authentic silence really is hard to find. John Cage's 4'33" is composition as listening exercise, directing an audience to re-examine what they think "nothing" is, as background becomes foreground. Properly framed, silence can transform from an absence or void into a near-tangible presence, as in those 'empty' shots of wind stirring grass in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), in which something unknowable seems to look back at you. Rivette concludes *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974) in oppressive, supernatural silence, as fictional characters make an uncanny incursion into the reality of his heroines.

Had Franz, you wonder, not seen Jules Dassin's *Rififi* (1955), with its famous heist sequence, a full 25 minutes (or eternities) long, dialogue- and music-free, soundtracked only by the occasional muffled noises of four burglars robbing a jewellery shop? Everyone knows that the loss of one sense can heighten the others, and so it



The strong, silent type: Josh Brolin as Llewelyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men* (2007)

is with *Rififi*'s caper. With the sound down, you focus on minute visual detail. You notice the cushion thoughtfully positioned behind the head of the tied-up wife. You notice shoes: Jean Servais's Tony le Stéphanois, suavely suited but wearing tennis shoes to tread noiselessly; Perlo Vita (Jules Dassin himself) as César le Milanais in an improbable pair of ballet slippers. When they turn the apartment's lights on, you wince: the brightness of the light feels too loud. And at its heart is the moment when safecracker extraordinaire César begins to crank round a cylindrical saw – a perfect visual symbol for the ratcheting tension, but also an explosion of sound which, set at the crescendo of that super-extended silence, sounds almost luxuriously harsh, as metal grinds metal into white noise. When the film cuts to the street outside and we see *les flics* on their round, they too are silent, pointing out the stolen getaway car to each other and using hand-gestures to ask a shopkeeper for his phone. The whole world of *Rififi* is in on a conspiracy of silence.

The loss of one sense can heighten the others. In 'Rififi', with the sound down, you focus on minute visual detail

Rififi is also the archetype for a very particular kind of cinematic silence, in which the notion that actions speak louder than words is tested over and over. It's a taciturn, macho move: Jean-Pierre Melville echoes it in *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970), Alain Delon picking the lock on his handcuffs and soundlessly swinging off a bunk to escape arrest; later, we see a *Rififi*-style silent heist. More recently, in Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), Josh Brolin's character is introduced during a score-less eight minutes, in which he interrupts his hunting to investigate the scene of a drugs gang massacre, and discovers a briefcase stuffed with cash. No music, half a dozen lines, just the crunch of boots on desert



Café society: Sami Frey, Anna Karina, Claude Brasseur in *Bande à part* (1964)



The silent treatment: César le Milanais knows the drill, in *Rififi* (1955)

PRIMAL SCREEN THE WORLD OF SILENT CINEMA



Filmed Shakespeare is almost as old as cinema itself – but in the silent era, it was done very differently

By Bryony Dixon

Four hundred years dead and as popular as ever: the man himself may be sans teeth, sans everything, but the world of stuff that is Shakespeare is alive and ready to party. From the purity of a recreated performance at the Globe to the banality of a Shakespeare-themed fridge magnet, our super-visual media world has more ways than ever to represent the iconography of our national poet; and important anniversaries, such as the quadricentennial of Shakespeare's death, concentrate attention on a global scale. There's a lot going on round the world – not least the BFI/British Council internationally focused Shakespeare season, which promises some silent film treats.

For the Shakespeare 400 festivities, film will be on an equal footing with stage performance, speeches, publications, art and historical exhibitions. This was not the case for the tercentenary in 1916, when the celebrations followed the same lines as Shakespeare anniversaries since the 18th century – publications, performances, pageants and parades and the inevitable statues – and film was largely ignored. It didn't matter much: the cinema industry had developed enough to guarantee the public's attention, even if it still hankered after the elite's notice and approval. So the filmmakers of the day hopped on the bandwagon, presenting an array of productions that tell us a lot about how film was evolving and how they dealt with the challenge of adapting Shakespeare for a wordless medium.

There have always been two basic types of Shakespeare film, even before sound came in: films that are vehicles for great performers and films that translate into cinematic spectacle the worlds Shakespeare invites us to imagine – for example, in the great prologue to *Henry V*. So in 1916 cinema audiences could watch great Shakespearians such as Herbert Beerbohm Tree performing his *Macbeth*, Séverin-Mars in the same play in France, Frederick Warde in the US doing *King Lear* and Matheson Lang as Shylock in a British *Merchant of Venice*. This type of film, essentially the record of a performance filmed from the point of view of someone watching a stage play, was part of a tradition that began in 1899 with the very first Shakespeare film, Beerbohm Tree's four scenes from his production of *King John*. Such films were sold as prestige products, trading on the reputations of the stage performers; they varied in quality, depending on the style of performance and the degree of intervention by the filmmaker. More nuanced and intimate performance worked better than the flamboyant poses of 19th-century popular theatre, but could seem flat if the film

Ophelia's drowning takes place off stage, but few filmmakers have been able to resist the image



In a 1909 Lear scratches in the film simulated rain

did not offer more than a static head-on view. Different angles and size of shots could focus the audience's attention and give the performer more scope to use facial expression and gesture to compensate for the lack of dialogue.

The other kind of Shakespeare film was, in the silent era, all about spectacle, storytelling and recognition, building on centuries of popular adaptations of Shakespeare's works – printings of the plays and poetry, Hazlitt and Lamb's condensations, and paintings and illustrations of all kinds. These images were sometimes so powerful that they would creep into the action – Ophelia's drowning in *Hamlet*, for instance, in the play takes place off stage, but few filmmakers have been able to resist the image of her long hair trailing in the water. Swordfights and battles were tempting, too, as were the expressionistic possibilities of scenes such as the storm in *King Lear*. In a particularly good version made in 1909 by the American company Vitaphone, Lear's raging, against the backdrop of Stonehenge, is amplified by torrential rain – an effect produced by scratching the surface of the film. Early Shakespeare films were surprisingly inventive, though they should never be seen as attempts to adapt the whole plays: they are more like visual quotations, to borrow a phrase from Judith Buchanan's book *Silent Shakespeare on Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse*. Wordless though they were, these early efforts could show Puck putting a girdle round the world, get across Mark Anthony's speech to the Romans (surprisingly well), and portray the delights of the pastoral comedies, the pathos of Shylock or the handwringing of Lady Macbeth.

By 1916, cinema had stars of its own. In the US, the premiere of one of two film versions of *Romeo and Juliet* that year was mobbed by fans celebrating a love of both Shakespeare's characters and the film's stars; ever self-conscious, Britain produced a spoof called *The Real Thing at Last*, written by J.M. Barrie, comparing two imaginary approaches to *Macbeth* by British and American filmmakers, the one excessively restrained, the other completely over the top, with an inevitable Hollywood happy ending. It is a tragedy that this film has not survived, but many other silent Shakespeare films remain to charm us. ☺

grit, or the chink of a shell-casing against gun-metal. Between Delon and Brolin lie numerous westerns and action sequences depicting the mute conviction of absolute competence: men of few words, in films of few sounds.

Yet the more you look for examples of cinematic silence, the more clearly it seems that silence and trauma are intimately linked in film. It's the solution to sounds so shattering, so sublimely immense they go beyond the physical limits of hearing. Otomo Katsuhiko's *Akira* (1987) opens with the super-expanding bubble of a nuclear explosion annihilating Tokyo in perfect quiet; it ends with a silent burst of psychedelic geometry which connects it to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013). Twice in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) the din of war leaves Tom Hanks's character deafened in a sonic bubble of his own, hearing only the muted rush of his own bloodstream. A similar trick features in Sam Mendes's *Jarhead* (2005), as Jake Gyllenhaal stands outside his trench during a mortar attack, pissing his own fatigues.

Emotional detonations have their own deafening aftershocks. After his terminal cancer diagnosis in Kurosawa Akira's *Jikū* (1952), we see Shimura Takashi's character, downtrodden civil servant Watanabe, walk in pure post-production silence down a street – the clamour of which cuts in with shocking violence as he nearly steps abstractedly off the pavement and into the path of a truck. In Stephen Frears's *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), arch-manipulator Madame de Merteuil (Glenn Close) staggers from the scene of her social disgrace, booed by a packed theatre of *ancien régime* toffs, and the film ends on an extraordinary diminuendo. De Merteuil wipes off her powder in a moment of pin-drop quiet, with the score only seeping in as the light dies around her, leaving the faintest after-image of a skull. After the horrific scene in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995) in which Elisabeth Shue is attacked and raped by three frat-boys, Mike Figgis shows Shue's bruised face moving cautiously into shot from behind a wall in complete silence. Silence falls too when Nicolas Cage's character nearly suffers an alcohol-induced coronary. As Figgis comments in a lecture on film sound: "This moment in the film – in a crowded cinema, with a good sound system – was extremely uncomfortable when he's so distressed. Suddenly it's so quiet in the cinema that you can literally hear everything, and you don't have the protection of this sound blanket of mush, or just ambient noise which we come to expect of a soundtrack. It's like that moment when suddenly you're talking animatedly and then everybody stops talking and you realise your voice is a bit loud."

If silence is golden, why, encountered in the cinema, should it so often tend towards the disturbing? Perhaps because if you have bought the ticket in the first place, the peace and quiet of the gallery, museum or park is precisely what you don't want. But absolute silence, so rarely encountered, can unnerve. Anechoic chambers – super-soundproofed spaces engineered to mute all background noise – are said to induce panic. In *Bande à part*, Franz cracks after just 35 seconds: "J'en ai marre – I'm going to put a record on." ☺

PIER PRESSURE



'Lyrical, elegiac, frank and realistic': Pallavi Paul's *Long Hair, Short Ideas* (2014) explores the experiences of the wife of Bengali radical Vidrohi

Newcastle's AV Festival took its cue from Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* to ask hard questions about contemporary political reality

By John Beagles

Sometimes the key works in festivals aren't where you expect them to be. This year's AV Festival – Newcastle upon Tyne's biennial festival of contemporary music, art and film – is a case in point. While there was a varied programme of screenings and exhibitions in venues around the city, what reverberated most was not the programme of screenings and exhibitions but the boldly emblazoned title chosen for the next two festivals: 'Meanwhile, what about Socialism?' Encountering this question – posed by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* – on posters and banners as you walk through the streets was a useful interruption to the smooth flow of consumerism that dominates British life. With Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders centre stage, the intervention felt timely, focusing on the question of whether socialism could offer a solution to the problem of, as Orwell put it, "living in a world in which nobody is free, in which hardly anybody is secure, in which it is impossible to be honest and to remain alive".

Testimony (2015), a demanding two-hour film by the Russian-born artist Haim Sokol, screened at the Tyneside Cinema, bore witness most powerfully to a brutalising society of the kind recorded in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Through lengthy stationary shots of the repetitive, pointless labour of two mute, nameless workers in a desolate paper factory in Moscow – mopping a floor, hammering nails and, inexplicably, painting a line of Wellington boots blue and yellow – Sokol generates a picture of mundane horror, a reminder of the fundamental

labour of history's invisible protagonists: as Bertolt Brecht wrote, "In the books you will read the names of kings. Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?" In a contemporary context, the toil of the two protagonists is a pointed reminder of the humanity behind the mercilessly misrepresented, de-individualised humans who exist in the populist imagination as statistics or a threatening 'swarm'. Sokol's film doesn't need the image of a dead child to shock an infantilised public into noticing suffering and misery. It relies instead on qualities increasingly disregarded – concentrated viewing and a capacity for empathy.

The necessity of empathy was also made clear in Pallavi Paul's *Trilogy*, shown at Baltic 39. *New Harvest* (2013), *A Dictionary* (2013) and *Long Hair, Short Ideas* (2014) – by turns lyrical and elegiac, frank and realistic – examine the costs of, and necessity for, political action. Nominally starting with the life of the 1970s Bengali radical

Vidrohi, Paul's films reanimate a turbulent revolutionary moment in Indian political and social life, creating a collage of the sacrifices made by everyone involved in protest. Of the three films *Long Hair, Short Ideas* is most compelling when the focus shifts to Vidrohi's wife (that is how she is always referred to). Her testimony of unconditional love and support, recounting how she physically carried Vidrohi's emaciated body and nursed him back to health after his imprisonment, offered a memorable illustration of the way that socialist ideas are not just rooted in rhetoric but embedded in daily actions of care and empathy. Her account of the vicissitudes of her unofficial revolutionary struggles was funny, defiant, proud and poignant. The psychological, material and emotional price she paid was a powerful reminder of the risks of dissent.

Elsewhere in the festival, the films of British filmmaker Marc Karlin provided a pertinent reminder of a culture of critical filmmaking that not so long ago had a place in the mainstream, and Tim Brennan's re-enactment of the Jarrow march of 1936 and Dan Perjovschi's wittily acerbic political cartoons continued the festival's themes of the necessity of remembering and the possibilities of contemporary political agency.

Part One of 'Meanwhile, what about Socialism?' operated, then, as a telling reminder of erased lives, and an antidote to cultural amnesia and political blindness. It was in part seeking to lay the ground for the restitution of a critical left-wing culture. With a growing, dynamic range of individual and collective practices in Britain now reimagining how we can respond to "living in a world in which nobody is free" – such as Mark McGowan, Arts Against Cuts and School of the Damned – the new work commissioned for Part Two, scheduled for 2018, responding to the show's title and question, should offer an equally absorbing experience. ●

Sokol generates a picture of mundane horror, a reminder of the fundamental labour of history's invisible protagonists



Haim Sokol's *Testimony* (2015)

MONUMENT MAN

From sculpture to sex-trafficking, the work of Deimantas Narkevičius explores the legacy of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe

By Juliet Jacques

The Lithuanian artist Deimantas Narkevičius took up filmmaking soon after the collapse of the USSR, and his works have often addressed his nation's transition towards liberal capitalism and how it has handled its Soviet heritage – particularly its monuments. Born in Utena in 1964, Narkevičius trained as a sculptor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts and spent a year in London in 1992–93. On his return to Lithuania he maintained his interest in site-specific art, but also recorded conversations with artists, becoming interested in narrative structures, subjective memories and the manipulative nature of film.

In *Role of a Lifetime* (2003), Narkevičius asks explicitly what it means to be a filmmaker. Commissioned for Brighton and Hove's Art in Sacred Places project, this was one of many films by Narkevičius to use archive footage, cutting between shots of 1960s Brighton and drawings of Grutas Park, the Lithuanian sculpture garden where many Soviet-era statues ended up. His interviewee was Peter Watkins, maker of politically charged documentary-style features such as *The War Game* (1966) and *Punishment Park* (1971), who had left England, frustrated by censorship and neglect, and was at this point living in Vilnius.

The combination of the exiled Watkins's voiceover, about how people are overly influenced by "hierarchical" moving images, and the Super 8 records of a bygone British holiday culture created a nostalgic effect. But Watkins undermines this, saying that while some people consider Grutas Park's tendency to foster longing for the Soviet period "a disaster", others welcomed a place to reflect. The overt ideology embodied by the statues of Lenin, Marx and other "horrors" underlined Watkins's insistence that no art could be neutral, and that any artists who claimed to be so were deluding themselves.

Two subsequent films focused on statues, as Narkevičius highlighted the political implications of editing. In *Once in the XX Century* (2004) he reversed footage from 1991, broadcast across Europe, to show Lenin being re-erected before a cheering crowd; in *The Head* (2007), he gave an insight into the processes behind such monuments, re-editing an East German documentary about the artist Lew Kerbel making a 40-tonne statue of Marx for Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) – with no body since, in Kerbel's words, "Karl Marx has no need for legs or hands; his head says everything". Though both works might be accused, like Grutas Park, of romanticising the past, Narkevičius's point is that removing these symbols of power didn't change its structures, nor deliver the improved living standards promised by the adoption of Western-style democracy.

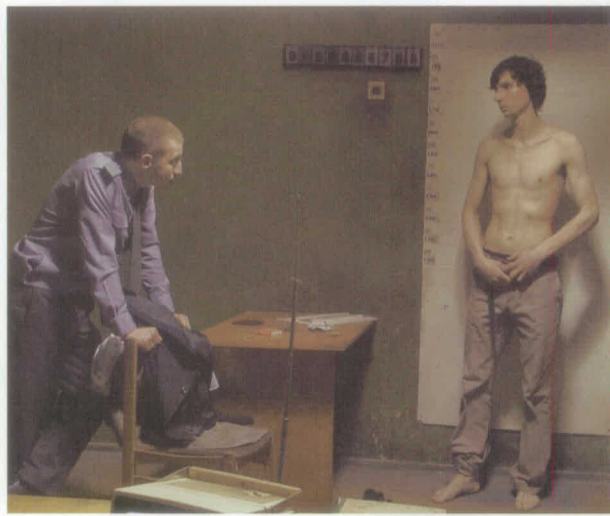
Narkevičius's films are often stridently conceptual, but they are not without emotion. One of his most moving is *Revisiting 'Solaris'*



Donatas Banionis in *Revisiting 'Solaris'*

(2007), in which the Lithuanian actor Donatas Banionis, Kris Kelvin in Tarkovsky's 1972 adaptation of Stanisław Lem's novel, reprises the role. Narkevičius's film adapts the novel's last chapter, which Tarkovsky omitted: here, Kelvin reflects on his brief time on the planet Solaris just before returning to Earth – maybe too undramatic for a feature, but perfect for more poetic video art. Eduard Artémiev's iconic soundtrack is blended with new scenes, representing the planet through photographs taken by the Lithuanian symbolist artist Mikalojus Giurlionis in 1905. The tone is one of melancholy for possibilities not explored, as reconsidered by someone close to death. The film works on several levels: it suggests another ending to a film already concerned with the porous borders between memory, hallucination and reality, but the

'Restricted Sensation' turns the post-Stalin criminalisation of homosexuality into a metaphor for censorship, but the pain is real

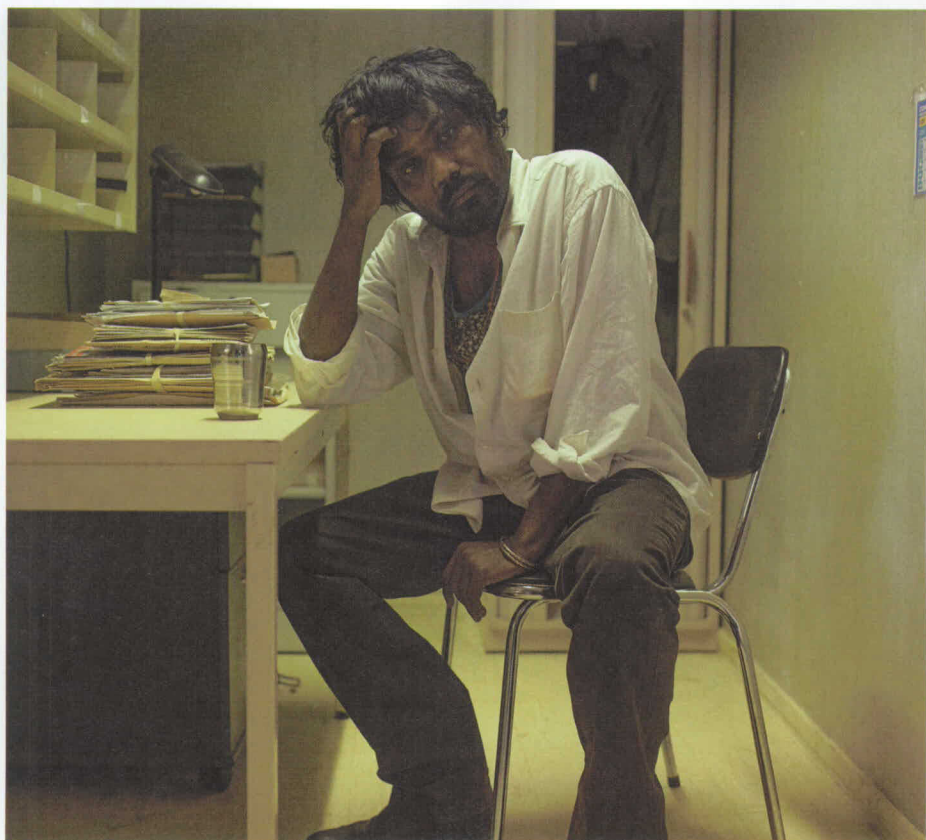


Empire of the censors: Valentinas Krulikovskis, right, as Laimonas in *Restricted Sensation*

wistfulness emanates not just from Kelvin but also from Banionis, then 83 years old.

There is no nostalgia, however, in *'Matrioska'* (2005) or *Restricted Sensation* (2011), harrowing works about sexuality and violence, the former set in 21st-century Europe, the latter in the USSR of the 1970s. In *'Matrioska'*, professional actresses re-tell the narrative of a Belgian TV drama about sex trafficking from Eastern Europe, *Matriosjka's*, as if its stories of enforced sex work had happened to them: the illusion that this is a documentary is only broken when one says, "Then he killed me." It continues, but now we know that, as Watkins put it, "the film is a complete cheat". The film's anecdotes are clearly grounded in the disappointments of post-Soviet reality, but is the 'truth' of *'Matrioska'* literal or literary?

The ethics of using such a serious subject in this sort of experiment are complex but, crucially, Narkevičius ensures that human suffering is never downplayed. *Restricted Sensation* turns the post-Stalin criminalisation of homosexuality into a metaphor for censorship; but although Narkevičius stated that it "is not aiming to depict the explicit, illegal life of gays in the Soviet Union", the pain it shows is very real. The film is minimal, its muted colours and lighting recalling Fassbinder, its drama kept simple. Laimonas, a director and stage manager, becomes suspect after criticising his theatre's "dull, irrelevant" productions: he is barred from directing, accused of "running a secret organisation" for gay men, and sent to prison, where the guards assault him. Eventually, he admits to an officer, "I don't like girls, I'm different", and the film comes to an oblique end: there is no glorification of the Soviet past, no glossing over its brutalities and, after all Narkevičius's explorations of the manipulative nature of film, no propaganda in favour of the present. ●



Suburban commando: Antonythasan Jesuthasan as Dheepan, a Tamil fighter who has found a job as a caretaker after seeking asylum in France

Dheepan

France 2015

Director: Jacques Audiard

Certificate 15 114m 41s

Reviewed by Ginette Vincendeau

Spoiler alert: this review reveals a plot twist

Despite the esteem in which its director Jacques Audiard (*A Self-Made Hero*, *Read My Lips*, *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, *A Prophet*, *Rust and Bone*) is widely held, the award of the Palme d'Or to *Dheepan* at last year's Cannes festival was controversial, and it is easy to see why. This tense social drama about three Sri Lankan refugees living on a French sink estate suddenly turns into a vigilante movie, before confusingly concluding as an English suburban idyll.

The beginning suggests economically the horrors of the Sri Lankan civil war. In order to claim political asylum, Dheepan (Antonythasan Jesuthasan), a former Tamil fighter, hastily assembles a pretend family with 'wife' Yalini (Kalieaswari Srinivasan) and nine-year-old 'daughter' Illayaal (Claudine Vinasithamby). The trio embark on the voyage to France, where,

after various odd jobs, Dheepan finds work as a caretaker on a nightmarish suburban estate abandoned to local drug-trafficking gangs. 'Run-down' doesn't even begin to describe the place, which is endowed with an ironically bucolic name – 'Le Pré' ('The Meadow') – as are so many similar concrete housing projects in the French suburbs. *Le Pré* is on the edge of vast fields but, rather than promoting closeness to nature, the location simply enhances the sense of isolation; the unfolding scenes on the estate will confirm this sense of living apart from the mainstream of French society.

It's an unpromising start, but gradually Dheepan, Yalini and Illayaal come to terms both with their new environment and with each other. Until the last half hour of the film, Audiard brilliantly walks the line between documentary and fiction, keeping us on the edge of our seats while observing the mundane yet tense unfolding of Dheepan, Yalini and Illayaal's daily lives. Slowly the three members of the false family bond, and Dheepan and Yalini's relationship eventually, and predictably, becomes sexual.

Another of the film's achievements is to redefine the notion of the outsider. We quickly

come to share the three migrants' view of a society they barely understand; none of them speaks any French at first, and for a while they have to rely on Illayaal's budding proficiency, acquired at school. To them, the environment itself is outlandish. As Yalini tells Dheepan one night, while they covertly watch the local youth's noisy antics from their darkened room, "It's like being at the cinema."

As if on cue, events then turn not just nasty but spectacularly so, as gang violence escalates. Dheepan tries to distance himself from it, literally drawing a 'no-fire zone' between his block and



Kalieaswari Srinivasan, Vincent Rottiers

the one occupied by the gangs. Simultaneously, his past catches up with him, as Tamil colonel Cheran (Vasanth Selvam) brutally orders him to help the fight at home. These events seem to unlock some primeval, violent urge in Dheepan. But rather than addressing the Sri Lankan conflict, the tragedy of migrants or the French social malaise, the final bloodbath nods towards Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) and macho heroics à la Sylvester Stallone.

Even putting aside the generic about-turn and the implied equation of the Sri Lankan civil war with the Parisian suburbs, the depiction of the latter rankles. Audiard has claimed he wanted to avoid a "sociological approach to the film *de banlieue*". That may be so, but in offering such an extreme, dysfunctional portrayal of the estate, where there appear to be virtually no "normal" inhabitants (such as women and children), *Dheepan* reinforces the clichéd notion of the Parisian suburbs endlessly recycled in the French media – a hellish habitat populated with testosterone-fuelled and violent delinquents from North African backgrounds (and it beggars belief, given the almost civil-war climate depicted in the film, that the police are not once seen on the estate). The vision offered by *Dheepan* reduces the complex reality of working-class suburban estates – including Les Coudraies in Poissy, north-west of Paris, where the film was shot. While not entirely problem-free, Les Coudraies is quiet – one inhabitant who worked as an extra declared, "There has not been a single gunshot in 20 years." The estate was recently saved from demolition by the residents, who pleaded with the mayor to renovate it instead.

Dheepan's violent turn also toxifies the film's hitherto subdued gender politics. From the start, Yalini subtly but persistently resists Dheepan's efforts at integration in a particularly gendered way. At first she refuses to work, sulks and reads *Elle* in secret, prompting Dheepan to exclaim that he is "looking after two children". Reluctantly, she agrees to work as a cook for a disabled older man and makes some success of it, despite her inability to communicate in French. The theme of Yalini's girlish immaturity is pursued, however, in her naive fascination with her employer's son Ibrahim (Vincent Rottiers) when he comes out of jail, even though he is clearly a psychopath. Ultimately this is what involves her and Dheepan in the final bloody mayhem. As she lingers on after her work is finished one day, she finds herself caught in the crossfire when gun-toting hoodlums come to wreak revenge on Ibrahim; and this in turn provokes Dheepan's killing spree as he comes to her rescue in the ninth-floor apartment. And then, jarringly, we find ourselves in a quintessentially leafy English suburb for the film's coda. Yalini and Dheepan (who has somehow become a black-cab driver) and their new baby as well as Ilayaajal enjoy an alfresco lunch, surrounded by other happy Sri Lankan families; their normalisation is complete.

This apparently unironic vision of England's green and pleasant land may of course be interpreted as fantasy, as it answers Yalini's dream of settling in Britain. But the abrupt geographical and sociological rupture from everything that has come before is grating and implausible given the film's investment in realism up to this point. (These somewhat improbable narrative turns may have been brought about by Audiard submitting an unfinished print in time for Cannes and then deciding to keep that version after winning the Palme d'Or). Still, given the



Claudine Vinasithamby as Ilayaajal with Antonythasan Jesuthasan

An abrupt narrative rupture towards the end is grating and implausible given the film's investment in realism, but it remains a powerful film

context of the refugee crisis in Europe, to jettison the story's political potential in this manner seems at best provocative and at worst careless.

With these reservations, *Dheepan* remains a powerful and memorable film. Dheepan is a complex, flawed and yet sympathetic hero who, like the character played by Tahar Rahim in the prison drama *A Prophet* (2009), credibly metamorphoses from underdog to

winner. One may regret that, yet again, this takes the route of caricatured macho violence. Nevertheless, except in the shootout scene, the characters remain believable and affecting, thanks to superb performances by the three leads, despite their lack of film experience. In the relatively small role of Ibrahim, Rottiers also gives a brilliantly sinister performance.

Dheepan, a film almost entirely in Tamil and with no known stars, was a potentially risky project; but Audiard has succeeded in reaching a wide audience. His ability to combine social drama with stylish filmmaking further secures the unique place he has carved out for himself within French cinema, as an auteur open to topical issues; no doubt it is this overall achievement, rather than a gripping but uneven film, that the Palme d'Or recognised. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Screenplay

Noël Debré

Thomas Bidegain

Jacques Audiard

Director of Photography

Espérance Mercier

Editor

Juliette Weillinger

Art Director

Michel Barthelemy

Original Music

Nicolas Jaar

Sound

Daniël Scimone

Gashane Designer

C. Bourne

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Productions, Page 114

France 2 Cinéma

Companies

Page 114 and Why

Not Productions

presents a Why Not

Image 5, Palatine

Productions, Page

114, France 2 Cinéma

co-production

With the participation

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Région Île-de-France

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In association with

Cinéma 9, A Plus

Image 5, Palatine

Etoile 12, Indefilms

3, Banque Postale

Image 5, Cofinova

11, Soft'Voix 2,

Soficinema 11

Yalini

Claudine

Vinasithamby

Ilayaajal

Vincent Rottiers

Ibrahim

Marc Zinga

Youssef

Faouzi Bensaidi

Mourad Habib

Bass Othem

Aziz

Vasanth Selvam

Colonel Cheran

Sri Lanka, the last days of the civil war. Tamil fighter Dheepan flees the fighting. In a refugee camp he teams up with a woman, Yalini, and a nine-year-old girl, Ilayaajal, so that they can pretend to be a family and claim political asylum in France, though their dream is eventually to go to England. In Paris, Dheepan finds a job as a caretaker on a run-down suburban estate blighted by drug trafficking and gang violence. With help from Dheepan's boss Youssef, the three slowly begin to adapt to their new life, while also learning some French. Ilayaajal attends school and Yalini works as a carer for Monsieur Habib, a disabled man who is soon joined by his son Ibrahim, a hoodlum fresh out of jail. After initial hostility,

the relationship between Dheepan and Yalini improves and they start sleeping together. During an outing with others from the Sri Lankan community, Dheepan is contacted by Colonel Cheran, a Tamil leader who orders him to continue the fight by sending arms. Meanwhile violence on the estate escalates. Yalini desperately wants to go to England; Dheepan gets her a passport and money. However, while at work Yalini is caught in the crossfire when Habib and Ibrahim are shot dead by rival gangsters; Dheepan goes on a killing spree to save her. The end of the film sees Dheepan and Yalini living safely in an English suburb with Ilayaajal and their new baby.

I Am Belfast

United Kingdom 2015
 Director: Mark Cousins
 Certificate 15 84m 6s

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

Like Terence Davies's *Of Time and the City* (2008), Mark Cousins's latest feature-length essay is a musing on return: another native son revisiting the hometown that shaped him. Unlike Davies, however, and unusually for Cousins, given his predilection for turning the camera on himself, what he does here is depersonalise the encounter. Offering little in the way of autobiographical framing beyond that notion of return, and keeping himself off screen, Cousins instead filters his observations through the avatar of a centuries-old lady who, as the title suggests, is the living embodiment of Belfast and its turbulent past.

Of course, we're always aware that Cousins has scripted her narration, but this potentially rather arch device in the event works very well. Helena Beren's wise if somewhat unreadable onscreen presence registers a character whose wanderings are far from predictable, and whose vocal delivery really makes us listen. Moreover, that she somehow represents the memory of the land itself has the effect of freeing the proceedings from the usual arts-doc functionalism – we don't see so much as a map – in the process allowing the film to balance out big-picture historical overview and in-the-moment spontaneity in what's ultimately an unconventional, undeniably disarming evocation of the spirit of place.

Quite apart from these sound creative imperatives, there may be another reason why Cousins doesn't make a great show of his own particular Belfast connections. A fact of life for the locals, but harder to explain to outsiders, is the degree to which ingrained tribalism builds a whole set of historical, religious and ideological categorisations from each and every hint of personal detail. No one would ask your voting preferences or churchgoing loyalties straight out, but the answers to seemingly innocent queries – "What school did you go to?", "Where do you live?" – provide enough social context to imprint indelible cultural branding. Traditionally, neutral terrain has been sparsely populated in Northern Ireland; so Cousins's decision to shape the film around an imagined identity rooted in a sense of place, rather than in the conflicting affiliations of its citizens, is both a canny tactic and a defiant statement that there is indeed a way to look at the city that doesn't involve orange- or green-tinted glasses.

At which point it's best to disclose that your reviewer grew up on the other side of town from Cousins (and hasn't been back very much since), and so my abiding feeling that watching the film is like seeing a familiar place through new eyes is doubtless not the typical response of an intended international audience. Still, prior to the shoot, Cousins valiantly attempted to walk every street in Belfast, and whether it's down to that freshly renewed acquaintance, or indeed the presence of the lauded, much-travelled cinematographer Christopher Doyle, there's a real precision and confidence about the images here. Underpinned by an effective score from fellow Belfast boy David Holmes, combining ambient electronics and ethereal vocals, the whole project conveys an upgrade in technical polish, and a more considered quality which differentiates it from the on-the-hoof



A pinch of salt: what looks like a forgotten desert turns out to be a huge pile of salt near Belfast's docks

insouciance of previous Cousins filmic essays, including the Eisenstein-infused *What Is This Film Called Love?* (2012) and the delightful *Tirana* sojourn *Here Be Dragons* (2013). That's clear from the striking impression left by its opening Belfast location, which looks like some forgotten desert but turns out to be a huge pile of salt near the docks. From there, as Beren ushers us around suburban and city-centre streets, a series of imposing compositions contrast slate skies with the colourful ongoing riot of flags and murals.



Helena Beren as Belfast

It's not just an architectural survey, though, since you could hardly come to Belfast and not engage with the people, their firmly held opinions and often remarkably inventive way of expressing them (something surely also to be said of Cousins himself). There's one vintage TV vox-pop gem in which a middle-aged man fervently describes love as "like having jam roll down your back but you can't even lick it", while an all too brief coffee stop with irrepressible old gals Maud and Rosie records a decades-long friendship breaching the sectarian divide and a pedal-to-the-metal command of Anglo-Saxon expletives that's joyously shameless. If anything, we could have done with more of this, but Cousins has a grander thematic purpose in mind, with Beren's observation that Belfast is where the river meets the sea setting up a metaphorical armature for the key notion that it's a place perennially defined by its clashing opposites.

It's typical that Cousins, who's always fascinated by street-level business, whether fictional or *vérité*, illustrates this with some seemingly innocuous footage of two strangers walking towards each other under a railway



filter for such real-life traumas. He conjures up the epic sequence of the World War I dead rising to confront the living in Abel Gance's silent-era *J'accuse!* (1919) and, even more unexpectedly, drops in 1954's *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, menacing his prey from the depths. All of this provides a visual entry-point for broader reflections on a daunting subject, thus allowing us to broach issues such as collective responsibility for the carnage, capacity for change, and the dark memories still swimming around in the unconscious. Only Cousins would make those sorts of connections, but they're valid, they resonate, and most useful of all, like the film as a whole, they stand for the notion that the way for Belfast to move forward is to find new ways to think about itself.

That much is highlighted in the rest of the running time, which focuses more on the lingering presence of the pragmatic but divisive 'peace line' walls keeping opposing traditions apart than it does on the spectacular recent building programme that has transformed the city centre. Eventually, the sheer weight of bitter memory brings Bereen to a tearful catharsis, which feels earned even if it plays a little overlong on screen. But there's optimism, too, as Cousins looks forward to the passing away of bigotry and basks in the restorative glow of the everyday kindnesses that, he suggests, typify the real Belfast.

Judicious in its approach, slightly eccentric in its method, yet thought-provoking in its overall impact, this is a fine achievement from someone who's spent so much of his time amiably lionising the cinematic achievements of others. Most pleasing, perhaps, it shows Cousins's very individual brand of filmmaking gaining in ruminative potency without having to sacrifice its quicksilver visual quality and affectingly sincere buttonholing personality. **B**

'I Am Belfast' is at its most forceful in its even-handed and adept encapsulation of the darkest days of the Troubles

bridge. Intermittently the frame freezes as they edge closer to each other, and we wonder what could happen next in this city of never-quite-dormant conflict – might they knife each other, or embrace like old friends? It's a neat little visual conceit, but what's really important is actually frame right, where a *trompe l'œil* mural commemorates McGurk's Bar, an ordinary working-man's pub now remembered as the site of one of Belfast's most horrifying bombings. Quite how Cousins was going to accommodate this awful chapter of Belfast history within his film's overall design was always going to be the sternest test, yet *I Am Belfast* is at its most forceful in its controlled, even-handed and adept encapsulation of the darkest days of the Troubles. Sensitive to the terrible losses suffered by both communities, Cousins makes powerful use of old TV news coverage, playing it against Bereen's palpable unease at still being haunted by the events – and her feeling that even now she can't quite believe what people did to each other.

Cousins goes beyond conscientious reportage, though, making a keen claim for cinephilia's collective memory as a meaningful emotional

Credits and Synopsis

Producers

John Archer

Chris Martin

Writer

Mark Cousins

Image by

Christopher Doyle

Mark Cousins

Editor

Timo Langer

Production Designer

Shane Bunting

Music

David Holmes

Sound Recordist

Marty Harrison

©The British Film

Institute / I Am

Belfast Limited

Production

Companies

BFI, Hopscotch Films,

Northern Ireland

Screen and Creative

Scotland present

a Hopscotch Films

and Candelbriks

Films production

Developed and

produced with the

partial assistance of

the European Regional

Development Fund

through Northern

Ireland Screen

Supported by the

National Lottery

through Creative

Scotland

Made with the support

of the BFI's Film Fund

Executive Producers

Glen Leyburn

Lisa Barnes O'Sa

David Holmes

Lizzie Francke

Cast

Helena Bereen

Belfast

Sean Perry

the last bigot

Shane McCafferty

bus driver

Patricia Brook

Betty

Cherrie Onlup

Sassie Longshaft

drag queens

Rosie McKee

Maud Bell

lively women

Helena Bereen

Mark Cousins

Laird Roddy

voices

In Colour

[1781]

Distributor

BFI Distribution

An essay film in which writer-director Mark Cousins returns to Belfast, the hometown he left decades ago. He encounters an old woman who claims to be the living embodiment of the place and its turbulent history. Starting in a seeming lunar landscape that turns out to be a huge mound of salt near the docks, she guides the viewer on a tour through the suburban streets and city centre; at the same time, archive footage looks to the past, when linen was woven and ships were built, and illustrates the local gift for language. That Belfast is a place where rivers meet the sea is, the woman suggests, an appropriate metaphor for the political and religious opposites

that have so often been in conflict here. Reflecting on the Troubles, she recalls the arrival of the British army on the streets, the families forced to leave their homes and the atrocities committed by both sides, musing on whether people have really changed – before recounting the transformation that Belfast has seen in the wake of the peace process. The so-called Peace Line still marks the division between the two communities, however; by looking forward to its demise, the woman imagines the celebrations at the death of the city's last bigot. Before departing, she reflects on the small everyday kindnesses that typify Belfast life and engender hope for the future.



Field of dreams: Michael Shannon as Roy with his eight-year-old son Alton, played by Jaeden Lieberher, whom he has rescued from a cult

Midnight Special

USA/Greece 2015

Director: Jeff Nichols

Certificate 12A 111m 39s

Reviewed by Kate Stables

Spoiler alert: this review reveals a plot twist
Oedipal antagonism doesn't seem to be a problem for Hollywood filmmakers these days – not for J.J. Abrams, whose Spielbergian *Super 8* and 70s-nostalgic *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* draw heavily on the cinematic enthusiasms of his youth; and not for Jeff Nichols, whose lean, earnest chase movie is a fond and open tribute to the 80s sci-fi of Carpenter and Spielberg. But for Nichols – a filmmaker with a style very much his own, one that infuses genre with down-home naturalism and a taciturn emotional intensity – homage involves a rigorous and personal reimagining of his boyhood cinema. As he told *Indiewire*: “They can’t just be those films – those films have been made.”

Midnight Special's cross-state fugitive dash to get an alien child to a mysterious destination is obviously modelled on Carpenter's 1984 film *Starman* (right down to the lens flares), but it has a slow-drip tension and ambiguity that are altogether new. Refusing to explain what has stung Roy (Michael Shannon, even more intense than usual) into snatching eight-year-old prophet

Alton from a Texas cult, *Midnight Special* opens with an ominous FBI raid on the Ranch, the cult's home. The slow extraction of information from fervent, Alton-obsessed zealots and arrogant cult leader Meyer suggests a conspiracy thriller. But the desperate chase across the South that follows also blends the small-town everyday with otherworldly bursts of sci-fi eruption, in a fashion distinctly familiar from *Starman* and *ET: The Extra-terrestrial* (1982). Who is Adam Driver's NSA analyst, intently deciphering Alton's number prophecies as top-secret security coordinates, but another incarnation of Peter Coyote's 'man with the keys' in *ET*?

You'll look in vain, however, for Spielbergian sentimentality or Carpenter's sweet road-trip romance. Nichols doesn't do 'feely' movies; neither does he do humour, unless you count the gentle teasing of 2012's *Mud*. Shannon has built a four-movie bond with him based on men of doomy truculence or stoic decency who rarely crack a smile. Nonetheless, Nichols's films have powerful emotional impact, expressed here, as in *Shotgun Stories* (2007) and *Take Shelter* (2011), through a man's love for his family. In Shannon's understated but sharply focused performance, Roy (Alton's biological father) emanates a fierce paternal protectiveness as he totes his weakening, photosensitive son towards his destiny. This emotional heft is key, since Nichols has swapped his usual thematic

layering (*Take Shelter* is rich with metaphor about the shakiness of the environment and the economy, *Mud* with nostalgia for vanishing ways of life) for a more stripped-down feel.

Chase films demand this kind of honed approach. Nichols is looking to expand his range as a director, and he concentrates heavily on the crosscut action between the fugitives, the FBI's hi-tech search for a child they think is a weapon and the cult heavies who need their child prophet in order to survive the Judgement Day they see in his predictions. The switches between them are nicely taut. There's a slamming shoot-and-snatch when Alton is grabbed from a motel, which sideswipes the unwary viewer. Caught up in maintaining momentum and ruthlessly shedding rich characters along the way, the film misses the chance to develop the pursuers as well as the pursued. If the rather less interesting con-and-kid fugitive movie *A Perfect World* (1993) could round out Clint Eastwood's relentless lawman without losing speed, Nichols's film could have achieved that too. Instead, only Driver's wry Paul Sevier moves from being obsessed with Alton as a phenomenon to engaging with him as a child. Indeed, Nichols is so resistant to spelling things out, or retaining excess story baggage, that the narrative develops a kind of steely thinness. Pleasing enough in its own right, perhaps, but it makes the road to Alton's alien ascension starker than it needs to be.



You'll look in vain for Spielbergian sentimentality or John Carpenter's sweet road-trip romance. Jeff Nichols doesn't do 'feely' movies; neither does he do humour

The actual roads, however, are quite another thing. Nichols, a native of Arkansas, makes the film's Southern settings resonant. A sci-fi movie that prefers to skirt small towns rather than smash cities to pieces, *Midnight Special* finds a spare, unconventional beauty in its wide shots of dusty Texas roads, scrubby Louisiana fields and shabby tract houses. DP Adam Stone makes the night-driving sequences inky and atmospheric, and turns an aerial shot of highways into a stunning river of lights. Within this naturalistic landscape, the sudden SFX eruptions of Alton's light-streaming eyes are startling, especially when combined with David Wingo's pulsing score; like the boiling skies and flocks of birds that haunted *Take Shelter*, they are all the more unsettling in their everyday setting. Nichols' knack for planting the otherworldly in the mundane emerges cannily, at the most unexpected points. The subterranean power unleashed by communion with Alton's terrifying lighthouse stare batters a sleeping house like a *pivata*, a satellite rains down in a shower of melting lights and crashing metal over a gas station where he hears astral voices.

Alton becomes less fascinating, though, as he changes from an enigma, protected from daylight and boredom by swimming goggles and superhero comics respectively, to a faintly Christ-as-a-child figure who leads his father into close encounters of the predictable kind with alien mushroom clouds. Watching him pop the locks of an army base with a blink, or flush the power of a sunrise through his veins, undermines the sense of jeopardy that makes Roy's Herculean efforts to keep him safe so moving. Jaeden Lieberher plays him with a fragility that his deadpan turn in 2014's *St Vincent* didn't hint at, and a gravitas that matches Shannon's own. Truly touching, though, is Joel Edgerton's toughly loyal Lucas, riding shotgun with father and son. Trembling before he puts a bullet in an inconvenient cop, or stung by helpless envy at the sight of Roy and Sarah (Alton's mother) hugging their child, Edgerton draws the eye. His friendship with Roy, a mostly wordless 'good ol' boy' union that includes crashing roadblocks, is another of the studies of masculinity that every Nichols movie includes. Sidelined by the supremacy of the father-son bond and introduced late into the mix, Kirsten Dunst's low-key rendition of Sarah's tentative mothering makes the best of a sketchy job.

Having created his own moving and melancholy take on both 80s sci-fi and the government chase movie, Nichols returns to

the traditional template late on. It's a surprising and not entirely welcome turn, since the vast metallic city of light that bursts open above a Louisiana field to claim Alton feels as if it belongs in something far more generic. Wonder, the kind that *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) generated with its musical mother ship, eludes this shimmering rendezvous, despite the flickering Spielbergian figures that welcome Alton home. Light has been the film's governing motif, cutting through the night scenes as lens flares, a sunset splitting the rumbling ground around father and son, and unearthly rays pouring from Alton as both weapon and benediction. The action even divides deftly into night-time mystery and daytime revelations. Yet the film's big moment fails to illuminate, in spite of the undeniable beauty of designer Alex McDowell's glistening sky world. Truer to the film's distinctive, allusive mood is a piercing last shot of the imprisoned Roy, chained and festooned with medical cables like a latter-day saint, drenching his gaze in the blazing sun. Like the convict in the folk song from which *Midnight Special* takes its name, he finds hope and salvation in a beam of light. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Sarah Green Brian Kavanaugh-Jones Written by Jeff Nichols Director of Photography Adam Stone Edited by Julie Monroe Production Designer Chad Keith World Designer Alex McDowell Music David Wingo Production Sound Mixer Post Cusack Costume Designer Erie Benesch	and Ratpac:One Entertainment LLC Production Companies Warner Bros. Pictures presents in association with Ratpac:One Entertainment, Fallco House Productions Executive Producers Steven Mirochin Gen Basner Hans Graftunder Chris V. Konstantakopoulos Cast Michael Shannon Roy Tomlin Joel Edgerton Lucas	Kirsten Dunst Sarah Adam Driver Paul Sever Jaeden Lieberher Alton Sam Shepard Calvin Meyer Bill Camp Oak Scott Haze Livi Paul Sparks Agent Miller David Jensen Elden Dolby Digital In Colour [2.35:1] Distributor E! Films
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Texas, present day. Roy Tomlin and his friend Lucas have snatched Roy's eight-year-old son Alton from a Texas cult. Travelling by night, they are hunted by the FBI. Cult leader Calvin Meyer dispatches men to reclaim Alton. The FBI raids the cult and interrogates its members, who believe that Alton is their saviour, and that his light-emitting trances predict the world's end. NSA analyst Paul Sever, working with the FBI, reveals that Alton's numerical prophecies are top-secret security coordinates. After a road crash, Lucas shoots a police officer. Hiding out with ex-cult member Elden, they trace the location that Alton's predictions identify. Elden's forbidden communion with Alton's light-beaming eyes nearly destroys the house. Alton's powers make a satellite crash into a gas station. The group rendezvous with Alton's mother Sarah in Louisiana. Alton is weakening; he and Roy hide in a rural cave overnight to escape FBI drones. Alton tells Roy he belongs to an alien race that lives above the Earth. Sever works out the location that Alton is looking for and takes the FBI there. Alton is snatched from a motel by cult heavies, but the FBI finds them and arrests him. Making a connection with Sever, Alton escapes and races with his family and Sever to the key location. Roy and Lucas draw off the FBI pursuit before crashing their vehicle. A shining futuristic city materialises above Sarah and Alton; figures of light emerge and Alton joins them. The city vanishes. Roy and Lucas are imprisoned in a maximum-security jail.



Mad men: Michael Shannon (left) has starred in four Jeff Nichols films



Horn of plenty: Don Cheadle as Miles Davis

Miles Ahead

Director: Don Cheadle
Certificate 15 100m 10s

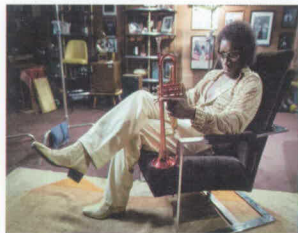
Reviewed by Mark Sinker

With the music so freely available elsewhere, present-day biopics about musicians are deeply in hock to the quality and purpose of the impersonations, with too timidly cautious attempts wasting everyone's time. Watchable if flawed, director-star Don Cheadle's *Miles Ahead* is as boldly conceived as it is obliquely realised. Your judgement on its success or otherwise is likely shaded by the extent of your impatience with such cosplay projects. "If you gonna tell a story," Davis apparently once advised chroniclers, "come with some attitude" – and Cheadle, who co-wrote this film (including some of its music), foregrounds the advice as validation and spur. (Much of Davis's dialogue has been adapted and quilted together from real-life interviews, notably a lengthy 1969 Q&A with *Rolling Stone*.)

The script digs past the usual reverence into the trumpeter's unendingly prickly exasperation, his dislike of explaining himself, his preference for head games as a weapon against racism and other misperceptions of his art. This was a restless, voracious musician, furiously refusing to allow himself to be trapped in other folk's versions of his past. The result is a constellated portrait of the changing contours of US bigotry between

the mid-50s and the early 80s. As a history, however, it's compromised by the present-day equivalents of the issues being sketched. At the international level, films centred on black creators – which is to say, with largely black casts – are hard to fund. After a decade of failed attempts, Cheadle acceded to the need for a high-profile white actor; in this case, some may think perversely, Ewan McGregor was seen as the necessary box-office draw to open willing wallets.

How then to shape a suitably justified storyline? Since only a fantasy could accord a white Scot such prominence, Cheadle's formal solution is to weave fiction into the facts. A white journalist, Dave Braden, is shooting a video interview with Davis, who protests his interlocutor's clichéd concept; Braden challenges him to tell it his way. Davis lifts his trumpet and a sequence of stories begins, entwining memory of the player's personal history with deliberately over-the-top gangsta-style fantasy, the latter heavily featuring Braden. Davis's acoustic music from the late 50s and 60s soundtracks his imprecise recall of the making of his own



All that jazz: Cheadle

name; his mistreatment of his first wife, the dancer Frances Taylor; his sense of loss, pain and guilt; various racist incidents. His conflicts with the music industry in the 70s – and the subjective responses of different species of imagined fans – are realised in a turbulent, absurd tale without basis in fact: the theft and violent retrieval of some session tapes, ending with the ringside shooting of a young rival's manager, all soundtracked by Davis's music from this later era, when he was fascinated by the sound and rebel theatre of large-scale amplified rock but also drawn to the music of Stockhausen, with its impastos of noise and electronic space.

As these different modes face off and clash, so do two eras of black self-representation and visual confidence, along with manifestations, in various registers, of mutual incomprehension. The cover artwork for Davis's earlier music had been elegantly aspirational, and groundbreaking in its use of black models (one of them Taylor); the later sleeves were a world away, typified by Corky McCoy's psychedelic ghetto-centric cartoons. The two story streams, real and dreamed, cut across one another more and more urgently, until they seem towards the close to coincide – at which point we grasp that Davis has played a single note to the interviewer, with everything that follows, connected but incompatible, contained within it, the entire polyglot clatter of mutually embattled responses and projections.

When a gun-toting Davis appears in the offices of Columbia Records, furiously angry, the manager of an ambitious young rival slow-handclaps him: "You used to be a musician!" A sneer inserted in a manifestly fictional scene, it's a nod, all the same, to the very real divisiveness of the figure the trumpeter was then insisting on cutting: an artist of great consequence who stood, in a period of social flux, in revolt against all that admirers felt he'd formerly achieved. The stolen tapes, for example, seem merely to contain a stew of *musique concrète* fragments and squiggled experiment – exciting for some, true, but as many will certainly be dismayed. Even *Kind of Blue*, that reliable warhorse of everyone's best-records lists, engenders disagreement. Early on, we see Davis calling a radio show to challenge respected historian-DJ Phil Schaap (a figure who, unlike Braden, is no screenwriter's invention). When Schaap hymns *Kind of Blue*, Davis corrects him: no, it was a misfire.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Danny Porter
Steve Wilkoson Jr.
Daniel Wagner
Robert Ogden
Barham
Don Cheadle
Pamela Hirsch
Lenore Zeman
Written by
Steven Bagelman
Don Cheadle
Story
Steven Bagelman
Don Cheadle
Stephen J. Rivale
Christopher Wilkinson
Director of
Photography
Robert Schaefer
Film Editors
John Avelard
Kayla M. Foster
Production Designer
Harriet Beecher
Composer

Robert Gaspar

Sound Designer
Ship Wilkoson
Costume Designer
Gertraud Phillips
Production
Companies
A Bifrost Pictures,
Crescendo
Productions, Naked
City Films and Solist
Films production in
association with Miles
Davis Properties
and IM Global
Executive Producers
Mark Aron
Steven Bagelman
Cheryl Davis
Erin Davis
Robert Lewis

Cast

Don Cheadle
Miles Davis
Ewan McGregor
Dave Braden
Emayatzy Finkelshteyn
Frances Taylor
Lakshmi Lee
Stanfield
Junior
Michael Stuhlbarg
Harper Hamilton
Phil Schaap
himself, DJ
Digital Dailies/
Datacast/SDDS
In Colour
[2.35:1]
Distributor
Icon Film Distribution

New York, 1981. Journalist Dave Braden is taping an interview with Miles Davis to mark the trumpeter's comeback after five years of seclusion. Davis objects to Braden's clichés; asked how he himself would tell his story, Davis plays a note on his horn, and various flashbacks and fantasy scenes ensue. These cover Davis's marriage, from its romantic start in the 1950s to its messy end in the late 60s; the making of the LPs 'Miles Ahead' and 'Nefertiti'; and the police attack on Davis outside the Village Vanguard jazz club in 1959.

Interact with these scenes is a contemporary narrative involving car chases, drugs and gunplay; a stolen session tape; the money owed to Davis by Columbia Records; and the role played in all of this by rival trumpeter Junior and his manager Harper Hamilton. This part of the story is seemingly fashioned around the lies Braden had to tell Davis to get an interview with him in the first place.

We cut back to Davis playing the solitary note on his trumpet. In an imagined comeback show, we see the rejuvenated Davis, with a youthful band, playing alongside his surviving 60s sidemen.



Cheadle, with Ewan McGregor as journalist Dave Braden

Later, in another wholly invented scene, Davis and Braden invade a student's bedsit to score coke. Seeing many of his LPs in evidence, Davis interrogates the student's girlfriend about them. Grinning, she admits she likes to get laid to a song on *Kind of Blue*, and hums the key two-note phrase of 'So What?' Which is it? That moment of historico-musical breakthrough, when jazz turned modal, as scholars like Schaap prefer? Or ambient make-out music for young white hipsters? Well, both – and more, because for Davis, everything in his later music was present in its earliest peaks, for those with ears to hear.

These short scenes are where Cheadle's approach pays off, as deep complications of

a music too often cocooned in critical piety. But the aftertaste of the larger compromise and of inadequate impersonation dominates. To deploy McGregor's presence usefully, the Braden character needs to be a temporary foil for Davis's cunning simultaneously a stand-in for the blurred entirety of Davis's white tormentors, fans and otherwise, and a doorkeeper to the whole hellish world foisted on all black musicians. But the black-white buddy dynamic this requires – volatile, complex, full of bile – is flimsy at best. The made-up Braden is a careerist bullshitter, his fandom mostly ill-informed pose – but McGregor merely redefines his usual one-note rueful likeability. By no means a cliché in written intent, Braden presents as one – until the flashes of mutual respect become formula, and the incomprehension feels cartooned, aspects of mere personal failing.

And here you probably must also indict Cheadle the actor. Slight and slender, he's a physical match for Davis, but in repose his face tends to a puzzled gentleness that's hardly the angry smoulder of reserve we see in so many Davis stills – the mask of performer was rarely dropped even with longstanding professional associates. It's an entertaining performance, bubble wig and all, but there's a failure of dynamic balance and chemistry. As agency passes to Braden, McGregor hasn't the chops to find anything double-edged enough in the device. There's much too much of the journalist, and in the end – given what was needed – he's a lot of nothing.

In life, Davis both used and misused his many white foils – and this has too often ended up at the fore of his story, at the expense of all his black colleagues and friends. But if there's the ghost of a critique here of the consequences of such mind games as tactic and strategy, it arrives diluted. First, by choices made casting the key white character. Second, by the fact that there's a guilelessness, almost an innocence, to Cheadle's version of Davis that perhaps says more about the actor-director's own character than it does about the many tangled subcurrents in the historical narrative. ●

The Absent One

Denmark/Germany/Sweden/Norway 2014
Director: Mikkel Nørgaard
Certificate 18 119m 40s

Reviewed by Adam Nayman

The 21st-century cottage industry of absurdly lurid Scandinavian thrillers continues unabated with *The Absent One*, the second film in the Danish 'Department Q' series after 2013's *The Keeper of Lost Causes*. By substituting two rumpled cops for a tarnished journalist and keeping any girls with dragon tattoos on the sidelines – at least for now – director Mikkel Nørgaard barely distinguishes his airport-paperback adaptation from the entries in the 'Millennium' novels. The underlying thematic similarities are undeniable, however: like the late Stieg Larsson, Danish author Jussi Adler-Olsen is a pseudo class-warrior fixated on revealing the depraved pathologies of the wealthy.

The villains here are rich kids who grew up to be influential power brokers, and the film alternates between flashbacks to their prep-school predations – beatings and rapes conducted from behind masks and under the noses of the college administrators – and their well-moneyed attempts to keep things covered up in the present tense. The heroes on their trail are cold-case detective Carl Mørk (Nikolaj Lie Kaas), who stalks around Copenhagen like Harry Callahan, and his partner Assad (Fares Fares), whose job seems to be to remind the audience of how irresistibly irascible Carl is. (Assad has no distinguishing traits of his own, which is why it's odd that Fares won the Danish Oscar for his performance.)

The cops chase leads while their targets twirl their mustaches, with Pilou Asbaek impressively hateful as Ditlev, the weedy adult incarnation of the gang's ringleader. The breaks in the case come resolutely on schedule. In a storyline constructed almost entirely out of genre clichés, from dubious superior officers and ominously revelatory black-and-white photographs to battered, vengeful survivors and a cat-and-mouse climax, Carl's world-weariness rings especially hollow: when he tells a key witness that he gets



School for scoundrels: Lie Kaas, Fares

up every morning thinking about suicide, it's a laughable grandstand play by the writers instead of a plausible piece of character psychology.

What the film lacks in believability or originality or good humour, it more than makes up for in grotesque excess. *The Absent One* is a very nasty and unpleasant movie, which is not a flaw in and of itself, but rangles in this particular context. As in Larsson's work, the sexual violence is meant as an indicator of moral seriousness when it's just so much pandering exploitation. (An inset shot of a mummified foetus is merely the most egregious example of the filmmakers' overreaching.) It'd all be fairly offensive if it weren't so feeble: this is the sort of movie where a bad guy lives in a mansion with a secret, neon-red chamber art-directed by the serial killer from *Seven*.

A critical and commercial success at home, *The Absent One* is built to travel, like the Swedish *Dragon Tattoo* movies before it. But it's surely not built to last. **B**

Allegiant

USA 2016
Director: Robert Schwentke
Certificate 12A 120m 37s

Reviewed by Lisa Mullin

The Young Adult demographic appears to have an insatiable appetite for tales of heroic teenagers being oppressed by corporate behemoths, so perhaps it's not surprising the genre now churns out product that merely ticks the boxes on the most basic level. The *Divergent* series was always a derivative affair, but this latest instalment has somehow managed to borrow only the boring and unsuccessful elements of its nearest analogue, *Mockingjay Part 1* (2014), without being able to fall back, as the *Hunger Games* franchise could, on the sheer charisma of its lead. *Allegiant*, too, is half a book paddled out into an overlong film, but its star, Shailene Woodley, is sadly no Jennifer Lawrence. Not that Woodley is given much to work with; once a plucky rebel leader, her character Tris is reduced here, for much of the time, to a pliant ingénue, while her boyfriend Four (Theo James) does all the sneaky, fighty stuff.

The premise of the series is that Chicago has become a kind of prison, having been surrounded by a giant wall because, you know, dystopia. Inside, the citizens are separated into groups according to their abilities and inclinations, but in the first film, Tris led a band of 'divergents' who refused this state-enforced typecasting, and now the system has disintegrated and Chicago is threatened by riots and mob rule. Tris, Four and a handful of fellow rebels break out of the city and discover a militaristic compound run by the Bureau of Genetic Welfare and led by the sinister David (Jeff Daniels). Tris is flattered into becoming David's stooge, though it's blindingly obvious he is up to no good. Sure enough, the Bureau has a dastardly plan and, once Tris has snapped out of her stupor, our teen heroes swing into action to save the day.

There's a lot of half-baked exposition about genetics which doesn't amount to a cogent narrative engine, although it gives designer Alec Hammond an excuse to go to town with soaring CGI architecture based on giant helixes. What's baffling, to the uninitiated anyway, is the complete lack of tangible divergence in any of the characters, who are an utterly vanilla bunch of forgettably symmetrical stereotypes. In theory, they are genetically damaged deviants and it's Tris alone who is hailed as miraculously 'pure', yet there's no evidence of this, except that she gets to wear a white outfit. The queasy intimation of a Nazi-style eugenics programme



Rebel crew: Theo James

Credits and Synopsis

Producer

Louise Vesth
Jonas Bagger
Peter Asbaek Jensen
Screenplay
Nikolaj Arcel
Rasmus Heisterberg
Based on Jussi
Adler-Olsen's novel
Reasdrabterne
**Director of
Photography**
Eric Krebs
Editors
Morten Egholm
Frederik Strunk
Production Designer

Rasmus Thjelleisen

Composers
Johan Söderqvist
Patrick Andrén
Uno Helmersson
Sound Designer
Hans Møller
Costume Designer
Stine Thuring
Production Designer
Sweden AB
Aps, Zentropa
Entertainments Berlin
GmbH, Zentropa
International
Sweden AB

Production Companies

Zentropa
Entertainments
present
In co-operation with
TV 2 Denmark, ZDF
German Television
Network, ZDF
Enterprises GmbH, TV
4 Sverige, TV 2 Norge
In co-production
with Film i Väst
With support
from DET Danske
Filminstitut,
Eurimages, Deutsche

Filmförderungs-

Filmförderungs-
Hamburg
Schleswig-Holstein
Produced by Zentropa
Entertainments20
Aps in co-production
with Zentropa
Entertainments Berlin
GmbH and Zentropa
International
Sweden AB
Developed with
support from the
MEDIA programme of
the European Union
Executive Producers

Doris Schrenner
Wolfgang Feindt
Peter Naderman

Cast

Nikolaj Lie Kaas
Carl Mørk
Fares Fares
Assad
Pilou Asbaek
Ditlev Pram
David Denick
Ulrik Dytball
Danica Curcic
Kimmie
Sarah-Sofie

Bousmina
Kimmie Som Ung
In Colour
(2.35:1)
Subtitles

Distributor

Picturehouse
Entertainment
Danish theatrical title
Fasandræberne

Copenhagen, the present. Cold-case detective Carl Mørk is confronted one night after work by an expoliceman who implores him to look into the murder of his son and daughter 20 years ago; when the man is subsequently found dead, having apparently committed suicide, Carl decides to take on the case. He and his partner Assad begin to suspect that the murders – and a number of other unsolved crimes – were the work of a group of students at a prestigious private school.

In flashbacks, we see that the culprits were two male students, Ditlev and Ulrik, and Ditlev's girlfriend Kimmie. After getting pregnant with Ditlev's child, Kimmie tried to break away from the group; as

punishment, Ditlev and Ulrik beat her until she miscarried. Knowing that her testimony is the only thing that can convict the well-connected Ditlev, Carl and Assad try to find Kimmie, who is now living on the streets. Meanwhile Ditlev sends an assassin to kill Kimmie to silence her. Kimmie escapes the attempts on her life (killing one assailant in a hotel room) and is taken into custody, where Carl vows to protect her. He and Assad go to Ulrik's mansion to retrieve evidence, but they're taken prisoner. Kimmie breaks out of jail and rescues them; Ulrik is killed and Kimmie pours gasoline on Ditlev and sets him alight, then walks into the blaze in an act of self-immolation.

Among the Believers

USA/United Kingdom 2015

Directors: Hemal Trivedi, Mohammed Ali Naqvi

isn't explored, and is instead brusquely swept aside by some chat about radioactivity and mutation, which again everybody just accepts.

Threadbare plotting aside, the film delivers the usual reversals and action sequences according to the accepted formula, and the undemanding will find it an adequate time-passer. But there are so many missed opportunities: Daniels can barely stir himself to plough through his pages of stodgy dialogue, and the effects team deliver some risibly dated and low-budget moments. Throughout, there is a sense that nobody could be bothered to produce a better film. The logic must be that it doesn't matter, because the audience will pay up anyway, but such poverty of ambition makes for a depressing spectacle all the same. **B**

Produced by

Douglass Wick
Lucy Fisher
Pouya Shahbazian
Screenplay
Noah Oppenheim
Adam Cooper
Bill Collage
Based on the novel
by Veronica Roth
**Director of
Photography**
Florian Ballhaus
Editor
Stuart Levy
Production
Designer
Alec Hammond
Music
Joseph Trapanese
Production
Sound Mixer
Peter J. Devlin
Costume Designer
Marlene Stewart
Visual Effects
Animal Logic VFX
BUF
Rodeo FX
Method Studios
Luma Pictures
Soho VFX
Crafty Apes
Iola VFX
Pixomondo
Fusion CI Studios
Stunt Co-ordinator
Chris O'Hara

©Summit
Entertainment, L.L.C.
**Production
Companies**
Summit
Entertainment
presents a
Red Wagon
Entertainment
production
A Mandeville Films
production
A Robert
Schwentke film
**Executive
Producers**
Todd Lieberman
David Lieberman
Barry Waldman
Neil Burger

Cast
Shailene Woodley
Beatrice Prior, 'Tris'
Theo James
Tobias Eaton, 'Four'
Jeff Daniels
David
Miles Teller
Peter Hayes
Ansel Egor
Caleb Prior
Zoi Kravitz
Christina
Maggie Q
Torii Wu
Ray Stevenson
Marcus Eaton

Mekhi Phifer
Max
Daniel Dae Kim
Jack Kang
Bill Skarsgård
Matthew
Octavia Spencer
Johanna Reyes
Naomi Watts
Evelyn Johnson-Eaton
Rebecca Pidgeon
Sarah
Xander Berkeley
Phillip
Katelyn Losondea
Uriah Pedrad
Jonny Weston
Edgar
Nadia Hilker
Juanita, 'Nita'
Andy Bean
Romit

Dolby Atmos
In Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor
E! Films

Main credits title
Allegiant

End credits title
The Divergent
Series: Allegiant

Main credits title
Allegiant
End credits title
The Divergent
Series: **Allegiant**

Reviewed by Hannah McGill

"What does force mean?" a teacher asks a science class in the course of this cool-headed study of Pakistan's recent religious turmoil. "What do we apply to set objects in motion?"

Force can, the film shows, take many forms: from the financial support once offered by the United States and Saudi Arabia to Afghan and Pakistani mujahideen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan, to the book burnings and suicide bombings that have characterised the upsurge in radical Islam in Pakistan since 9/11, to the pressure brought to bear on Pakistani parents to submit their children to religious rather than secular education. At the centre of it all is the Laj Masjid, or Red Mosque, in Islamabad. Established in 1966, it assisted the US by training up mujahideen to fight the Soviets in the 1980s. As Chief cleric "walked away, abandoned us," says cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz puts it, it has been the nexus of a bloody wrangle for Pakistan's religious identity. "We want sharia laws, but they don't," says Aziz of Pakistan's moderate population. "How can we ever get along?"

This is as understanding and conciliatory as Aziz gets. Though his tone and body language have a studied gentleness, his message throughout the extensive interview around which this documentary pivots is that there are but two acceptable options: sharia law, or unending war. "If you don't agree with us," he says, "then arrest us. Shoot us. But if you think you can change us, forget it." Still, Aziz insists, the Mosque is concerned only with providing religious education, and has no direct involvement in violence. "We are just educators," he says. "Nothing opens a child's mind more than Allah's Koran."

Not, arguably, if the child is learning purely by rote. "We don't know the verses' meanings. We only memorise them," says Talha, a student at the Red Mosque's madrassa who learns the Koran all day every day and sees his parents once a year. An alternative form of education is offered by a liberal school in the village of Bunni Behk, where Zarina, one of nine children at home,



War on error: Maulana Abdul Aziz

studies – but it is closed down by threats from extremists, and Zarina's family arrange for her to be married instead. Parents, meanwhile, are drawn to madrasa education because it's free.

Though Khalid Trivedi and Mohammed Ali Naqvi's documentary is careful to detail America's role in the initial training and encouragement of extremists in Pakistan, it goes on to present a stark dichotomy between a life lived for religion and one enriched by secular freedoms. This can feel crude or forced at times. Some will scent ideology, or at least a certain irony, in the fact that the closing image of unfettered, positive education settles on a child accessing Google. But the film has an extraordinary, disturbing resource in the form of Aziz: a bitter, uncompromising radical who seems almost to wink at the camera when he claims no involvement in violence. The film's analysis of his personality is discreet, but powerful in its exposure of both inconsistency and cowardice – as when this glorifier of 'martyrdom' dons a disguise in order to flee an attack on the mosque in which his students are being killed. ("So what?" he irritably fires at a TV interviewer who queries this approach.) Pakistan's crisis, the film contends, can be ascribed to no single source – true fanaticism, despotism cloaked as religious leadership, government corruption, American manipulation – but rather to a deadly mix. ☹

Produced by
Jonathan
Goodman Levitt
Written by
Jonathan
Goodman Levitt
Cinematographers
Sardar Habib
Ur Rehman
Haider Ali
Editor
Hemal Trivedi
Composer
Milind Date
Sound Editor
John Bosch

**Production
Companies**
Changeworks and
Manjusha Films
present in association
with Chicken and
Egg Pictures
Supported by CAAM
- Center for Asian
American Media.

Brick State Council on the Arts, Sundance Documentary Film Program, Tribeca Film Institute, A Changeworx and Marjusha Films production. Support provided by Doris Duke Foundation, The Independent Television Service (ITVS), IFP - Independent Filmmaker Project (Spotlight on Documentaries/Independent Film Week), Influence Film Foundation, Sheffield Doc/Fest - MeetMarket. Completed with the support of Women Make Movies Inc. Funding provided by JustFilms/

Ford Foundation,
CAAM - Center for
Asian American
Media in association
with Chicken and
Egg Pictures
Made possible by
the New York State
Council on the Arts.
Funding provided by
The Joan and Lewis
Platt Foundation,
Sundance
Documentary Film
Program, Tribeca Film
Institute (Tribeca All
Access/Guest Tribeca
Documentary Fund).
Executive Producer
Whitney Burton Dow

In Colour
[L78:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
DochHouse

Islamabad, Pakistan, 2009. The Red Mosque, a centre for Islamic prayer and teaching since 1965, teaches children the Koran through its network of madrassas. Scientist and anti-extremism activist Pervez Hoodbhoy backs to expose the Red Mosque's links to radical Islamism. In the terrorist attack of 2009, cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz died. In the village of Budin Behk, young Zarina explains how she fled madrassa education to attend a liberal school. Archive footage depicts the Red Mosque's history as a training centre for US and Saudi-backed mujahideen during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the growth of extremism in the 1990s and during the 2001 War on Terror, and the resulting and ongoing clash between conservative and moderate elements. Terrorist activity escalates, including many deadly attacks on schools; despite mass public protests, the Pakistani government remains unwilling to challenge extremists directly. Zarina's school is temporarily closed because of threats; her family arranges for her to marry. Her credits include *War of Wives* and *War of the Roses*. She eventually responded, that Zarina is now a mother, and that Aziz is under house arrest.

Chicago, a dystopian future. Having led a successful rebellion against the tyrant Jeanine, Tris and Four must now face the fact that Four's mother Evelyn is turning into another despotic leader, allowing the city to descend into war. They decide to find out what is in the forbidden zone beyond the wall. Breaking Tris' promise to stay out of the war, Four goes to the zone and make a daring escape under heavy gunning, during which Tris' friend Tori is killed. Having trekked across a polluted desert, they are rescued by a mysterious army and taken to a compound run by the Bureau of Genetic Welfare, led by David. Tris is declared to be genetically 'pure' and separated from the others. She initially trusts David but eventually learns that the Bureau is planning to use her as a seed for new groups according to their abilities, was set up by the Bureau as an experiment; David now plans to release a gas there to wipe everyone's memory so that the experiment can restart. Tris, Four and Caleb return to Chicago to stop the release of the gas. One of the fellows Evelyn releases, Peter, betrays them and persuades Evelyn to escape the gas, but Tris and her friends manage to escape. Tris and Four are now sworn to bring peace to Chicago, but David's forces are regrouping – the war with the Bureau is not yet over.

Anguish

USA 2015
Director: Sonny Mallhi
Certificate 15 91m 30s

Reviewed by Kim Newman

This low-key psychological/supernatural horror feels more like a successor to Robert Wise's 1977 reincarnation drama *Audrey Rose* (from a novel by Frank De Felitta) than to William Friedkin's touchstone 1973 possession picture *The Exorcist*, though its themes date back beyond the 1970s devil-movie cycle to the subgenre's urtext, the stage play *The Dybbuk* (the 1937 Yiddish film adaptation, discussed by Daniel Bird in the February 'Lost and Found' column of *S&S*, also informs the recent Polish movie *Demon*).

As in *Audrey Rose*, much of the angst here comes from a family trying to accommodate the grieving parent of a dead child who has taken up a new home in their own troubled daughter. The demonic is downplayed (though a vaguely evil spirit pops up late in the day) in favour of a complex tangle of relationships – which were already in a tailspin before death intervened, and which are carried on into the afterlife as emotional baggage becomes the ghost's traditional 'unfinished business'.

Written and directed by Sonny Mallhi, *Anguish* perhaps surprisingly takes an artier, more personal approach than the slate of genre films that he has worked on as producer (including the 2008 *Possession*, *The Strangers*, *The Roommate*, *House at the End of the Street* and the remakes of *Shutter* and *Oldboy*). The story is told in a laidback, indie-drama manner that gives it a depth not found in the average modern-day possession film (of which there are quite a lot). It's relatively light on jump scares, though the opening death-on-the-road scene delivers a shattering shock as teenager Lucy (Amberley Gridley) bickers with her mother Sarah (Karina Logue) and storms out of their stationary car only to be ploughed along the road by a speeding truck. The focus then shifts to Tess (Ryan Simpkins), a withdrawn girl on medication for a complex mental condition, and her loving but tired mom Jessica (Annika Marks). In a fugue state, Tess is drawn to the site of Lucy's death, which seems to have a magnetic attraction for her skateboard, and batted about by invisible forces... then Lucy takes over and seeks out Sarah.

Though it has a grounded, realistic feel and opens with a caption about the epidemic problem of mental illness in teenagers, *Anguish* wastes little time on rational explanations. When Tess rattles off minute details of Lucy's life, both mothers are convinced that it's really her – and



Just bad friends: Ryan Simpkins

then unsure what to do. "I'm not evil," insists Lucy from inside Tess, and so Jessica is persuaded to let the dead girl – who admits she's not sure how to let go of life – stay a while so that she can connect with Sarah, even as it's plain this isn't going to be an easy, comfortable or safe situation. Simpkins (following an imperilled part in *Hangman*) is extraordinary in a complicated role, even managing moments when two or more personalities are present in Tess's body – with the dark hint that if Lucy moves on, it's possible something other than Tess will take over.

Much of the film involves Tess just hanging about, slightly dissociated from reality, or acting out in ways that disturb those around her. As with the recent *The Witch*, this is a risky stratagem – audiences used to thrill rides like *Insidious* or *The Conjuring* may feel that 'nothing happens' when a movie with a complicated plot depends on ambiguities. The resolution is suggested rather than stated, as we wonder to what degree Lucy persists (a flash of eye-colour suggests she might) and just what the calmer, more productive Tess has learnt from the time-share in her body.

Anguish has a nice, misty look and a whispered, understated tone from all four leading actresses. Even when it defaults to convention – the possessed girl sees off a smarmy priest by knowing that he's a child molester – it is persuasive and unsettling. It's a rare film that manages to make skateboarding eerie, too. ☺

Arabian Nights Volume One The Restless One

Portugal/France/Germany/Switzerland 2015
Director: Miguel Gomes

See Feature on page 30

Reviewed by Tony Rayns

Pasolini's *Salo* led the way by including a bibliography/reading list in its credits. Now Miguel Gomes's magnum opus is the first film to display its own

index: a rolling caption in the end credits, listing the main chapters and the minute-count at which each begins. It ranges across all three 'volumes' ('The Inebriating Chorus of the Chaffinches' starts at Minute 297, for example), which suggests that volumes 1-3 should be taken as a single film, but Gomes insists in interviews that he wants them to be seen as separate films, preferably staggered across three days. So how should we take the index? It's no use at all as a practical tool, so maybe it's there to signify a grand design, an indication that serious thought has gone into the overall structure? Or maybe it's there ironically, to underline the film's playfulness?

The aim here was not in any literal sense to adapt *The 1001 Nights* but to co-opt its spirit – its profusion of narratives and voices, its fabulism, its vulgarity, its sense of injustice and cruelty – in the service of a portrait of Portuguese society wrestling with economic and psychological problems in 2013-14. Gomes had a team of researchers trawl local news outlets for material and went looking for characters and 'stories' with potential for the film, so the process was essentially serendipitous. Gomes had covered this waterfront before in *Our Beloved Month of August* (2008), another fact-fiction hybrid featuring cockerles, countryside arson, tangled career-paths and eclectic music, but one without this film's sombre underlying diagnosis of a country in deep trouble.

In *August*, Gomes played a director confident that he'd find the non-actors he needed for his storyline, constantly demanding money from his producer. Here he features at the start as a director with no idea how to proceed (he sits in a café with his head in his hands, a pantomime of anguish, explaining in voiceover that he doesn't know how to reconcile the parlous state of the nation with his wish to make something "marvellous"), and then does a runner chased by his crew. He's seen facing mock-execution just before Scheherazade first appears and the storytelling proper kicks in, and isn't seen again until he does a cameo in Arabian drag in *Volume Three*. This is feeble, joky stuff, more a narcissistic apologia for the randomness of what follows than a credible attempt to echo the ways that Godard and Pasolini cast themselves in their own films as organisers of their materials. It just about cuts it as a self-deprecating acknowledgement that directing films can be more fun than work.

We know from *Taba* (2012) and the earlier films that ex-critic Gomes is fundamentally a romantic, not an earnest left-wing social-realist in the Loach-Dardennes vein. So it's not surprising that he gets the politics out of the way in the opening episodes of *Volume One*. The film opens with reportage of the chaos in a shipyard facing closure (the workers are demanding their right to work – unlike Gomes himself, who runs away from his job) and its first 'story' then crudely satirises the negotiations over Portugal's national debt between the Troika and the prime minister, with representatives of management and the labour force in tow.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Sonny Mallhi
Guy Daniels
Written by
Sonny Mallhi
Director of
Photography
Amenda Treiz
Edited by
Andrew Coultis
Matt Oczel
Production Designer
David Christopher
Music
James Card
Sound Mixer
Dustin Berta
Costume Designer

Lana McAllister

Production
Company
A Candlewood
Entertainment
production
Executive Producers
Kho Wong
Malik Bader
Deepak Bajaj
Madan Pruthi
Kelly Patel

Cast

Ryan Simpkins
Tess
Annika Marks

Jessica

Karina Logue
Sarah
Amberley Gridley
Lucy
Cliff Chamberlain
Robert
Ryan O'Neil
Patricia Meyers
Paulina Oliszycki
Morgan

In Colour
12.35A

Distributor

Arrow Films

Present-day US. Sarah and her teenage daughter Lucy have a trivial argument while driving; when her mother pulls over at the side of the road, Lucy carelessly gets out and is run over and killed. Sometime later, troubled teenager Tess moves into the area with her mother Jessica. Creative and sensitive, Tess has various mental issues – and Jessica, whose husband is overseas in the armed forces, finds it hard to cope with her. Tess is drawn to the spot where Lucy was killed, and seems to become semi-possessed by the dead girl – convincing Sarah that Lucy is talking through her. Lucy is persuaded to leave Tess's body, but a malign presence seems to take over. Lucy eventually helps Tess become herself again, but doesn't entirely disappear.

Arabian Nights Volume Two The Desolate One

Portugal/France/Germany/Switzerland 2015
Director: Miguel Gomes

See feature
on page 30

Reviewed by Thirza Wakefield

To get the most out of the three films that make up Miguel Gomes's *Arabian Nights*, one should watch them one after the other in sequence.

That would seem, at least, to be the director's intention, for – even if, via intertitles, Volume 2 recaps Volume 1's explanation of the 1,001 *Nights* structure (Scheherazade narrating, each film divided into stories, each story inspired by events that "occur" in Portugal between August 2013 and July 2014) – this second film does without the 25-minute framing prelude of the first. As well as interlocking two different sets of documentary footage and their corresponding oral histories (one of a wasp exterminator, the other of an out-of-work shipbuilder), that overture saw the director desert his crew, literally running from the conundrum of how to make a film of imagination without also making a mockery of the social injustices of contemporary Portugal, a country "on bread and water".

The responsibilities of the trilogy's middle part are less than those of the first and third, the bookends. (In the first, the filmmaker must introduce his conceit; in the last, tie up the triptych and leave his audience feeling that the combined six hours were worth their time and attention – and indeed, particularly for those who don't understand Portuguese, the trilogy demands full concentration.) So, like the helical gut of *Toy Story's* Slinky Dog, this central section can, to a degree, do as it pleases. Gomes embraces this freedom, stretching his structural principle as far as it'll go in these intramural two hours.

The Desolate One is divided into three stories: "Chronicle of the Escape of Simão 'Without Bowels'", about an old killer on the run from justice, so dubbed because he eats what he likes and never puts on weight; 'The Tears of the Judge', in which a female magistrate, presiding over court proceedings in an amphitheatre, is exasperated by the interminable finger-pointing that prevents her from passing sentence; and 'The Owners of Dixie', about a stray dog thrice rehomed among high-rise tenants. This last story is split into three again, but its middle unit ('The Stories of the Residents of the Tower Block Told by Humberto and Luísa') neither fits with the logic of nor unfolds at the same tempo as the parts that hem it in.

This cascading sound like chaos; it isn't. Titlecards, using a bold, yellow typeface, aim to reduce confusion, doing for the film what terrace farming does for a steep hillside. But it is also, I think, the point of the film's involute architecture that the viewer should not feel too sure-footed; that the water, as it were, be just deep enough that they cannot stand. For in spite of Gomes's organisation – the 'Index' provided at the end of each film making clear that he doesn't intend the triptych to be difficult – there is still the prevailing sense that these stories have a life of their own. They are self-propagating: like strawberry plants, they put out runners, and these runners take root and up shoots a story. The image in 'Dixie' of vapour escaping an opened window is not only very beautiful; it also expresses the director's perception of these stories as unstopably expanding.

Besides Sayombhu Mukdeeprom's



To the wonder: *Arabian Nights Volume One The Restless One*

(The crucial intervention of a French-speaking African wizard doubtless owes more to Arabic myth-making than to geopolitical analysis.)

The subsequent loosely organised stories pick up on the absurdity of the first, not its satire of political scumbags. Next up is the fact-based tale of a rooster put on trial for crowing too early in the morning, which integrates another fact-based tale of a love-triangle featuring a spurned lover who sets forests and scrubland on fire. Gomes tweaks the latter, having the triangle played out by text-messaging kids. *Volume One* wraps with the mayor of a seaside town observing a (fictional) beached whale which explodes and a (factual) New Year's Day communal swim; this frames what seem to

be the real stories of four intending swimmers – two individuals, one couple – who recount their economically precarious working lives.

Despite sterling work in super 16 and 35mm Scope from Apichatpong Weerasethakul's favourite cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, this ramshackle assemblage has more in common with the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* than with Apichatpong's *Mysterious Object at Noon*. Its sheer scale and the mishmash of storytelling forms and styles command a certain admiration, but it's hard to shake the feeling that Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* would have provided a stronger conceptual foundation than Arabic folktales do. ●

Credits and Synopsis

Producers
Luís Urbano
Sandro Aguiar
Screenplay
Miguel Gomes
Mariana Ricardo
Telmo Churro
Directors of Photography
Sayombhu Mukdeeprom
A História do Gato do Rato
Mário Castanheira
Editing
Telmo Churro
Pedro Filipe Marques
Miguel Gomes
Art Directors
Bruno Duarte
Artur Pinheiro
Sound
Vasco Pimentel
Wardrobe
Silvia Grabowski
Lúcia d'Orey
800 Som in a Fúria, Shellac Sud, Komplizen Film, Box Productions, ADAT Films, ARTE France Cinéma, ZDF/ARTE in co-production
O Som e a Fúria presents in co-production

with Shellac Sud, Komplizen Film, Box Productions in co-production with ARTE France Cinéma and ZDF/ARTE with the participation of ARTE France RTF, RTS - Radio Télévision Suisse, SSR, SRS, AGAT Films, Michel Merkt with the support of ICA, Eclairages, CNC, Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Office Fédéral de la Culture (CFL), Suisse, Cinémaforum.

Literie Ronande
A film by Miguel Gomes
in co-production with ARTE France Cinéma, ZDF/ARTE, RTF, RTS - Radio Télévision Suisse, SSR, SRS, AGAT Films, Michel Merkt with the support of ICA, Eclairages, CNC, Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Office Fédéral de la Culture (CFL), Suisse, Cinémaforum.

CAST
Miguel Gomes
himself (filmmaker)
Crista Affante

Scheherazade
Basileus Otello
wizard
Luís Loureiro
Luís
Carlos Loureiro
Rui Miguel
Sabinha Lopes
Sandra
Margarida Rabaça
Catarina
Adriano Luz
Luís, union man
André Fabrice
Rui Silva
Sónia Vieira
Paulo Carvalho
Magnificencia

In Colour
(2.35:1)
Subtitles
Distributor
New Wave Films
End credits title
Volume One, The Restless One
Portuguese
theatrical title
As mil e uma noites
Volume 1 O Inquieto

Portugal, August 2013 to July 2014. The Viana do Castelo shipyard faces closure in the round of 'austerity' cuts mandated by the IMF. Protests erupt. Director Miguel Gomes despairs of reconciling his wish to record the "miserable state" of his country with his impulse to make a "wonderful, marvellous" film; he runs away, pursued by his crew. Facing execution for dereliction of duty, Gomes begs for leniency, promising to distract his audience with stories. On the island of the Young Virgins of Bagdad, Scheherazade takes over as storyteller.


'The Men with Hard-ons': Troika representatives, moving by camel from one inconclusive meeting with Portuguese bigwigs to the next, meet an African wizard who diagnoses them all as impotent. His magic spray

gives them permanent erections. The men agree on economic cuts. 'The Story of the Cockerel and the Fire': in the small town of Resende, a prized cockerel stands in the mayoral election. After winning many votes, he is put on trial for disturbing the peace by crowing too early. The cockerel heralds the story of a boy who jilted his girlfriend for a firewoman; the girlfriend seeks revenge by setting fires in the countryside. 'The Swim of the Magnificents': as people in Aveiro prepare for the traditional New Year's Day swim in the sea, a dead whale is washed up on the beach. Intending participants in the swim ('Magnificents') tell their hard-luck stories. The whale explodes. Mayor Luis spends the night on the beach and watches the mass swim the next morning.

Follow the herd: *Arabian Nights Volume Two The Desolate One*

 spectacular photography and some rascally, silent-era effects such as iris-ing and masking, there is no getting to know this film, no becoming tutored in its rhythms. This is some achievement: to have made each story completely different from the next and from the story that precedes it. Perhaps the trilogy's resistance to any kind of model is a political statement. *Arabian Nights* seems to say that the effects of policy – legislation meant to liberate Portugal of its debts – can look 1,001 different ways depending on the lens, depending through whose life we see economic reforms refracted. The triptych's wending unpredictability appears to contest the kinds of forecasts used

to justify punitive austerity measures.

The film yaws between two states, feeling sometimes like a fantasia shot through with truths, with hard data, at others like real-life Portugal patched with fantasy. By the time that a Day-Glo pedalo improbably appears in Simão's fugitive adventure, the film seems to ask why *can't* fantasy be coterminous with reality? It proposes that there is a place for imagination in the national cinema of "a country, sad among countries". After all, the language of economics is no less imaginative; the 'hypotheses' and 'projections' of creditors and bailout committees no less creative and in the mind than are Gomes's genies and bacchanalia. 

Credits and Synopsis

Producers
Luís Urbano
Sandro Aguilár
Screenplay
Miguel Gomes
Mariana Ricardo
Telmo Churro
Director of Photography
Sayombhu Mukdeeprom
Editing
Telmo Churro
Pedro Filipe Marques
Miguel Gomes
Art Directors
Artur Pinheiro
Bruno Duarte
Sound
Vasco Pimental
Wardrobe
Silvia Grabowski
Lúcia d'Orey
©O Som e a Fúria,
Shellac Sud,
Komplizen Film, Box
Productions, AGAT
Films, ARTE France
Cinéma, ZDF/ARTE
Production Companies
O Som e a Fúria
presents
in co-production
with Shellac Sud,
Komplizen Film,
Box Productions,

ARTE France Cinéma
and ZDF/ARTE
with the participation
of ARTE France,
RTS - Radio
Télévision Suisse,
SRG SSR, AGAT
Films, Michel Merkt
with the support
of ICA, Eurimages,
CNC, Région
Provence-Alpes-Côte
d'Azur, Office Fédéral
de la Culture (DFI)
Suisse, Cineforum,
Loterie Romande
A film by Miguel
Gomes
in co-production with

ARTE France Cinéma,
ZDF/ARTE, RTP,
RTS - Radio Télévision
Suisse, SRG SSR,
AGAT Films&CIE
Supported by
Institut Français
Executive Producer
Luís Urbano
Cast
Crista Alfaiate
Scheherazade
Chico Chapas
Simão Without
Bowels
Luísa Cruz
judge

Joana de Verona
judge's daughter/
Vânia
Gonçalo Waddington
thieving son/Vasco
Jolo Bénard
Da Costa
Humberto
Teresa Madruga
Luísa
Margarida
Carapiteiro
Glória
Isabel Cardoso
Ana
Lusky
Dixie
In Colour

[2.35:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
New Wave Films

End credits title
**Volume Two, The
Desolate One**
Portuguese
theatrical title
As mil e uma
noites Volume
2, o desolado

Portugal, present day. Simão – dubbed 'without bowels' on account of being so slim – is on the run from the law after killing his ex-wife, his daughter and two other women. Armed with a rifle, he swims by day and sleeps nights in outbuildings. Having lived all his life in the same village, he is known to those on whose land he trespasses. As a sheep farmer finds him in her barn, she does not hand him in. Having managed to evade justice for six weeks, Simão is apprehended when, for reasons unknown, he returns home. As the police car that carries him passes through the village, he is applauded.

After congratulating her just-married daughter on losing her virginity, a female justice presides over the trial of a woman who has sold her landlord's furniture.

The accused admits theft, but claims she had meant to give the profits to her daughter-in-law as compensation for having to endure her son's demands for sex. This activates a chain of blame that, seeming interminable, exhausts the magistrate and makes her job impossible.

A stray dog appears near a block of flats and is taken in by resident Glória, who in turn gives the dog, 'Dixie', to depressed tenant Luísa. Luísa and her agoraphobic partner Humberto befriend reformed drug addict Vasco and Vânia, one day depositing Dixie with the young couple on the pretence that they are going away. Luísa and Humberto are discovered dead, by suicide pact, 16 days after the exchange. Dixie ends up with the doorman's daughter-in-law and her young children.

Bastille Day

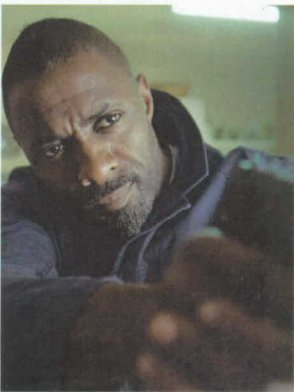
France/USA/Luxembourg 2016
Director: James Watkins
Certificate 15 91m 50s

Reviewed by Ginette Vincendeau

Spoiler alert: this review reveals a plot twist

Bastille Day is not entirely devoid of charm if you are a fan of Idris Elba and films set in Paris. Indeed, this action movie, directed by James Watkins, begins well in front of the Sacré-Coeur Basilica. We witness a young American pickpocket, Michael Mason (Richard Madden, of *Game of Thrones* fame), harvest a bumper crop of wallets and mobile phones from crowds of tourists while they are distracted by his accomplice, a beautiful young woman walking down the steps completely naked. Michael's pickpocketing skills unwittingly lead him into a wild plot when he steals a bag containing a bomb, which then goes off, killing people and causing mayhem. Mason is captured by CIA agent Sean Briar (Elba), and the two reluctantly team up in pursuit of the 'terrorists' – in fact undercover policemen bent on robbing the Bank of France during the Bastille Day military parade. *Bastille Day* offers the familiar pleasures of the disaster-averting action movie with its plot (will Briar and Mason save France over the next two days?), the initially ill-assorted – but eventually bonding – central male couple in pursuit of the villains, the dizzying chases in screaming cars and the violent gun battles. Watkins claims *48 Hrs* and the *Dirty Harry* films as inspiration, but the film pales in comparison, and there are diminishing returns in terms of locations. After the fun Sacré-Coeur opening, a vertigo-inducing rooftop chase is improbable but affords superb views over Parisian landmarks. The film also makes good use of a few 'lower-depths' locations, such as Barbès and a grim suburb or two. As one nears the climax, though, the use of the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich as the 'Bank of France' jars a bit, as does the even less French-looking King's College library in London for the final scene.

These might have been mere details had the action sequences been more gripping and the motifs slightly less clichéd (eg, po-faced CIA agents watching screens and tapping on keyboards). Elba is an imposing physical presence, his menace neatly balanced by wry



Saving the day: Idris Elba

Boulevard

USA 2014

Director: Dito Montiel

Reviewed by Kate Stables

A small film about a man making a late breakout from a small life, the introspective *Boulevard* has a hero for whom Thoreau's observation that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" seems tailor-made. Anxious to establish that sixtish Nolan Mack's life is constrained as much by his dutiful kindness as by his small-town existence, the film is conscientious to the point of dullness in establishing his joyless daily round of banking job, passionless marriage and thankless visits to his mutely senile father. Nonetheless, director Dito Montiel (best known for the 2006 life-on-the-streets drama *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints*) is acute enough to signal the underlying tensions in Nolan's fussy dinner party or his cautious, sexless bond with Kathy Baker's pleasant, bookish wife.

What powers this slight, melancholy movie, though, is Robin Williams's nuanced portrayal of the repressed hero, his last onscreen role. Alongside the outsized performances (*Good Morning, Vietnam*, *Aladdin* et al) and the caring roles (*Awakenings*, *Good Will Hunting*) that made him famous, Williams had a knack for the stranded and solitary character, seen to best advantage in his *One Hour Photo* obsessive. There's a certain fascination in watching his damped-down Nolan, a man whose jokes are modestly muttered so as to cause least bother, all cautious superego in contrast to Williams's trademark untrammelled id. He infuses the character with a useful sweetness, rather than the rage of the life unlive that we associate with male-life-crisis movies such as *Falling Down* (1993) or *American Beauty* (1999).

When, inevitably, Nolan fails for teen rent boy Leo, and sexless infatuation begins to pick his life apart, you wonder if the film's deliberateness and delicacy are just icing on an old-fashioned 'coming out' story. Tales of later-life changes of sexual orientation or gender may be currently being explored at length on cable TV (both *Girls* and *Transparent* prominently feature older men struggling to reinvent themselves), but for independent films the closet door has been open for some time. On closer inspection, however, *Boulevard* is more about letting go than coming out. The ties that bind Nolan are forged from



Arrested development: Robin Williams

his dutiful kindness – to his inert father, to his tedious boss and above all to his long-loved wife.

Neither Douglas Szeesbe's script nor Montiel's direction delivers anything novel or exceptional. But there's a subtlety, and an attention to detail that highlights what Nolan is reluctant to trash. The mutual love in Nolan's marriage is expressed through scraps of discussions about books, food and art films, including a fond rewatching of *Masculin féminin*. Baker is quietly good as Joy, a wife who prefers platonic togetherness to the unknown horrors of separation. It's a neat counterpoint to what Williams, talking about the life, described as an "arrested development romance" – the juvenile and obsessive longing for Leo that consumes Nolan. But Roberto Aguirre's nervy, bemused Leo is no *Scarlet Street*-style tempter. Szeesbe's script, smart enough to underline the hopelessness of their relationship, gives it the same careful consideration as the marriage. When Nolan defies the small-town shame of having his love for Leo exposed by a parking-lot brawl in front of his pitying colleagues, there's bravery as well as recklessness present. Williams's restrained performance gifts the film a measure of complexity, as well as its pervasive sadness. It's a graceful, unshowy coda to a fine career.

humour, two qualities that would of course make him perfect as James Bond, as is rumoured may be the case. Here, however, his performance, like Madden's, is not helped by the put-on American accent. The initially intriguing French 'terrorist' plot might have been grimly topical, as we watch Zoë (Charlotte Le Bon) hesitate to place a bomb at the headquarters of the fascist 'Nationalist Party' for fear of blowing up the office cleaners. But the real culprits turn out to be a gang of vicious undercover policemen led by Rafi Bertrand (Thierry Godard, best known for his role as a somewhat less flawed cop in the TV series *Spiral*, here sadly underemployed), who try to implicate Muslims to foment civil strife.

The political theme is eventually revealed to be a red herring when we find out that the ultimate aim of the conspirators – who include interior minister Victor Gamieux (José García), no less – is money. The ending degenerates into a chaotic bank robbery. In the end, excellent actors and nominal Parisian glamour can't save this formulaic movie.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
David Kantor
Barry Darrin
Philippe Rousselet
Written by
Andrew Baldwin
James Watkins
Editor
John Harris
Director of Photography
Tim Maurice Jones
Sound Mixer
Paul Kirby
Music
Alex Heffes
Production Designer
Michael Dreyer
Costume Designer
Gy Speranza
Stunt Co-ordinator
Jimmy O'Dee

association with
Avent Capital
Entertainment and
Amazon Prime
Instant Video in
partnership with
Vendome Pictures in
co-production with
TF1 Films Production
with the participation
of Canal+ (Cofin)
TF1's Anonymous
Content production
A Vendome Pictures
production
Executive Producers
Michael Dreyer
Fabrice Gasfermi
Guy Stodel
Steve Golin
Olivier Courson
Rui Halpern
Dan MacRae

Zoë Neville
José García
Victor Gamieux
Kelly Reilly
Karen Dacre
Thierry Godard
Rafi Bertrand
Dolby Atmos
In Colour
(2.35:1)
Distributor
StudioCanal Limited

©StudioCanal
S.A. TF1 Films
Production S.A.S.
Production Companies
StudioCanal
présenta in

Cast
Johnnie Elias
Sean Briar
Richard Madden
Michael Mason
Charlotte Le Bon

Paris, the present. Michael Mason, a young American pickpocket, becomes embroiled in a terrorist plot when he steals a bag belonging to a young Frenchwoman, Zoë. The bag contains a bomb that Zoë is supposed to place at the headquarters of the Nationalist Party – but hesitates when she sees cleaners in the building. When the bomb explodes in the street, killing four people, Michael is captured on CCTV and finds himself pursued by CIA agent Sean Briar and the French police. Eventually Briar and Michael team up as it becomes clear that the bomb is part of a larger plot set up by a team of corrupt undercover police officers led by Rafi Bertrand. The group's aim is to provoke chaos by making it look as if terrorists are operating out of mosques. Their ultimate aim is to rob the Bank of France during the Bastille Day military parade. It becomes clear that the minister of the Interior, Victor Gamieux, is also part of the conspiracy. In the showdown at the bank, Bertrand is killed. Michael steals his USB key loaded with millions of stolen euros. Gamieux tries to trick Michael into handing over the key; Briar intervenes and kills Gamieux.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Monica Aguirre
Diaz Barroso
Mia Chung
Jeffrey Gelber
Ryan Belenson
Written by
Douglas Szeesbe
Director of Photography
Chung Hoon Chung
Edited by
Jake Puzosky
Production Designer
Angela Messina
Music
David Witman
Jimmy Hahn
Production Sound Mixer
Steve Grider
Costume Designer
Carla Rosario
©Boulevard

Productions, LLC
Production Companies
Camella
Entertainment
presents in
association with
Belenson/Gelber a
movie by Dito Montiel
Executive Producers
Mark Moran
Todd Williams
Film Extracts
Masculin Féminin (1955)
Vengeance Valley (1951)
Chops (2007)
Cast
Robin Williams
Nolan Mack
Kathy Baker
Joy

Roberto Aguirre
Leo
Giles Matthay
Eddie
Eleonora Hendricks
Patty
Bob Odenkirk
Winston
In Colour
(2.35:1)
Distributor
Kaleidoscope Film
Distribution

US, present day. Dutiful sixtish bank worker Nolan Mack is lonely in his passionless marriage and small-town existence. His boss recommends him for a management job. Nolan picks up teen hustler Leo and becomes infatuated with him. He pays Leo's pimp Eddie to stop beating him, and is beaten up himself. He persuades a friend to hire Leo as a waiter, and buys him clothes, but Leo is fired for not showing up. Nolan finds a man in Leo's room and fights with the latter over his return to prostitution. Nolan tells his senile father that he is gay but has hidden it since 1965. His wife Joy confronts him about his night-time absences. Leo pleads with Nolan at the bank for \$3,200 to pay Eddie off; Eddie is arrested for brawling with Leo outside. Leo goes home with Nolan but disappears after they argue about their sexless relationship. A hospital calls to say that Leo has overdosed. Nolan goes to the hospital but Leo has already run away. Searching the streets for him, Nolan misses his job-interview dinner. He tells Joy that their marriage has never worked. He leaves his job and Joy, and starts to meet men.

The Brand New Testament

Belgium/France/Luxembourg 2015
Director: Jaco Van Dormael
Certificate 15 114m 37s

See Feature
on page 22

Reviewed by Leigh Singer

If Belgian director Jaco Van Dormael's fourth feature in 24 years – and first since 2009's *Mr. Nobody* – feels familiar, it's because those who subsequently

adopted his brand of whimsical fable achieved greater popular success than his own work ever did: think Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001) or the DIY surrealism of Michel Gondry. Evidently reinvigorated, Van Dormael returns with sharper focus and broader comic appeal in this religious satire, which should reassert his rhetorical prominence in Francophone fantasy cinema.

One could envisage his gleefully, gently blasphemous conceit – God as a capricious boor, undone by his own feckless cruelty, his rebellious daughter Ea and a human race forced to reckon with its mortality – played as apocalyptic Bergmanesque tragedy or ferocious takeaways of sacred cows. Instead, Van Dormael opts for something lighter, more allusive: global catastrophe as individual, spiritual reckonings. And, as with both his acclaimed 1991 debut *Toto the Hero* and *Mr. Nobody*, he explores ideas of reconstructing identity in the wake of personal, often familial trauma.

The Brand New Testament's Creator is decidedly 'Old Testament' (and Benoît Poelvoorde's haranguing fire-and-brimstone performance certainly demands job-like endurance from viewers). From a dingy Brussels office with walls of towering filing cabinets, God torments mankind with tyrannies petty (toast always falling jam-side up) and severe (plane crashes). In effect, He is antagonist not only to young heroine Ea (a winning Pili Groyne, Marion Cotillard's

daughter in *Two Days, One Night*) but also to Van Dormael's whole filmmaking ethos: rather than bureaucratic, autocratic directives from on high, this is free-floating, creative expression imbued with diversity and generosity.

Instead of trying to nail down the specific new doctrine suggested by the film's title, Van Dormael and co-writer Thomas Gunzig delight in comic meanderings and visual flights of fancy. Giraffes strut through deserted streets, a disembodied hand pirouettes to Handel, and random daredevil Kevin defies his distant death date (the pre-destined dates of everyone's demise having been leaked from God's computer) with increasingly outlandish stunts.

However, Van Dormael's mutability gradually reveals his *idée fixe*. The film's exploratory energy is explicitly guided by the female perspective at its centre: that of Ea and, latterly, her mother. It's the filmmaker's corrective to centuries of oppressive patriarchal dogma – God no longer has mankind 'by the balls' – and it's thus fitting that his own patchwork gospel remains a fluid, feminine text.

In pure storyline terms, this can frustrate. When Ea decides to write her "brand new testament", she goes in search of six apostles, and their sequential tales engender a stop-start approach that occasionally interrupts the film's overall trajectory. And the incessant quirkiness sometimes jars with bleaker issues such as sex addiction or domestic abuse, particularly in scenes underlined by composer An Pierlé's unsubtle brass flourishes. Overall, though, in an age dominated by religiously appropriated intolerance and violence, Van Dormael's inquisitive, playful optimism might just offer audiences attuned to his wavelenght something quietly and genuinely radical. **B**

Couple in a Hole

United Kingdom/Belgium/France 2015
Director: Tom Geens
Certificate 12A 104m 44s

See interview
on page 10

Reviewed by Jason Anderson

Viewers have grown so accustomed to grim and grisly tales of post-apocalyptic survival that they may mistake

Couple in a Hole for another entry in the canon. That'd be understandable, what with the film's essentially wordless early scenes depicting the primeval existence of a Scottish couple living in a forest in France. In their bedraggled clothes, John and Karen – played with an admirable degree of commitment by Paul Higgins and Kate Dickie – look as if they've been hastily forced out of a suburban cul-de-sac without the chance to find proper outdoor wear. Nevertheless, John demonstrates his hardness when he finishes off a freshly snared rabbit by whacking its head on a tree. Later, Karen smiles gratefully as he presents her with a handful of grubs – and judging by Dickie's emaciated form, she could use the protein. Only when John spies the vapour trail of a jet overhead is there any suggestion that this is *not* the end of the world.

Then again, the scenario in *Couple in a Hole* – a strong and stubbornly odd second feature from Belgian-born, London-based director Tom Geens – could be described as an apocalypse for two. Though the mood is sometimes leavened by moments of surreal humour (the climactic boar cameo being the most bonkers) and images that emphasise the raw beauty of the Midi-Pyrénées setting, it remains rooted in the feelings of pain, grief and guilt that derive from any parent's worst nightmare. Like Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Lobster* (2015), this is an absurdist allegory that boasts a surprising emotional potency for viewers willing to accept its idiosyncrasies.

Much of the credit for that goes to the performances of Higgins and Dickie. Toning down the fury that was his press-officer character's default mode in *The Thick of It*, Higgins adeptly handles John's swings between resilience and despair, brightening only in the scenes by the fire with Karen and those that chart the progress of his ill-fated romance with local farmer André. Meanwhile Dickie is just as remarkable (and gaunt) here as she was as the tormented Puritan mother in Robert Eggers's *The Witch*, lending Karen a curious dignity even when crawling on all fours like a feral beast or stripping down to ecstatically enjoy a rain shower with John. The latter sequence is one of many in which Geens effectively demonstrates the couple's intimate bond, beyond just stuffing them into a burrow (which, to be fair, Karen keeps impressively tidy – so much so that she's plausibly devastated when two local boys vandalise it).

Set to an unnerving score of pulsing, Krautrock-style rhythms and keening guitar lines by BEAK> – an experimental-rock side-project by Portishead's Geoff Barrow – Geens's film shares Karen's eagerness to dig deep into the landscape. Though the director has an unabashedly askew sensibility that brings to mind such continental peers as Quentin Dupieux and Alain Guiraudo, *Couple in a Hole* most strongly evokes the efforts of British directors who've also situated their characters in the muckiest and muddiest of circumstances. Like Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* (2013), Peter Strickland's *Katalin Varga*

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Jaco Van Dormael
Oliver Rautin
Original Screenplay
Daniel Marquet
Thomas Gunzig
Jaco Van Dormael
Director of Photography
Christophe Beaucarne
Editor
Hervé de Luze
Art Director
Sylvie Oliva
Original Music
An Pierlé
Sound
Dominique Warrier
François Dumont
Michel Schillings

Costumes
Caroline Koener
@Terra Incognita
Films, Climax Films,
Après le Déluge,
Juliette Films,
Caviar, Orange
Studio, VOO et BETV,
RTBF, Wallimage
Production Companies
A Terra Incognita
Films production
A Climax Films, Après
le Déluge production
A Juliette Films,
Caviar co-production
In co-production
with Orange Studio
VOO et BETV, RTBF

(Télévision Belge),
BNP Paribas Fortis
Film Finance, Belg
Productions
With the participation
of OCS, Le Pacte
Produced with the
support of Tax Shelter
du Gouvernement
Fédéral Belge, Casa
Kafka Pictures,
Movie Tax Shelter,
BNP Paribas Fortis
Film Finance, Belg
Films Fund
Supported by
Eurimages
Produced with
the assistance of
Centre du Cinéma

et de l'Audivisuel
de la Fédération
Wallonie Bruxelles
With the participation
of Fonds National
de Soutien à la
Production
Audiovisuelle du
Grand-Duché de
Luxembourg, La
Wallonie, Wallimage
With the support of
Fonds Audiovisuel
de Flandre (VAF),
Flanders Image,
Screen Flanders,
l'Agence Flandre de
l'Entreprise, Télénet
Executive Producers
Oliver Rautin
Jean-Yves Asselin

Film Extracts
Alexander Nevsky/
Aleksandr
Nevskiy (1938)
The Sheik (1921)
Cabiria (1914)
Cast
Pili Groyne
Ea: God's daughter
Benoît Poelvoorde
God
Catherine Deneuve
Mortine
François Damiens
François
Yolande Moreau
God's wife
Laura Verelinden
Auréli

Serge Larivière
Marc
Didier de Neck
Jean-Claude, J.C.
Romain Gelin
Willy
Marco Lorenzini
Victor
In Colour
(2.35:1)
Subtitles
Distributor
Métropole
Distribution Ltd
Belgian theatrical title
Le Tout Nouveau
Testament

Brussels, present day, God is a slovenly sadist, living in an apartment where he abuses the world's population via his personal computer and oppresses his captive wife and ten-year-old daughter Ea. Ea finally rebels against her father's tyranny and, after briefly consulting with her brother 'JC', sneaks into God's office and hijacks his computer, releasing the date of death of every single person in the world. Ea then escapes into Brussels through a secret chute in the apartment's washing machine, and sets out to find six new apostles to write a new and more spiritually uplifting Testament.

Enlisting the homeless Victor to document her efforts, Ea tracks down her six targets, who include Aurélie, a loveless, one-armed young woman; Marc, a middle-aged sex addict; Martine, an older woman

trapped in a loveless marriage; and Willy, a young boy with dyslexia, whose dying wish is to become a girl. By reawakening their inner lives – Marc finds the girl of his teenage fantasies now working as a voiceover artist for pornographic films, Martine starts an affair with a virile gorilla – Ea shapes the new gospel. Meanwhile vengeful, belligerent God, hunting for Ea in Brussels, finds himself powerless, constantly abused and eventually deported as an illegal immigrant.

Eventually God's wife takes control of mankind's destiny, cancelling the death dates and ushering in a kinder, more benevolent world. Victor turns the *Brand New Testament* into a bestseller. God is last seen trapped in an Uzbekistan factory, furiously searching washing machines for the tunnel back home.



Wild bunch: Paul Higgins, Kate Dickie

(2009) and Andrew Köttig's *This Filthy Earth* (2001), *Couple in a Hole* presents the natural world as brutally indifferent to the travails of humans. John and Karen's devastation drives them ever further into the dirt, so much so that the climactic chase scene, as André tries to force them out of the forest, seems a miscalculation on Geens's part. The film's peculiar tone becomes wobblier in the final stretch, Geens not quite managing to navigate the shift from grief-stricken black comedy to psychedelic backwoods thriller.

It all culminates in the cathartic fire that consumes Karen and possibly kills John, though little is clear in the cryptic finale, what with that boar abruptly emerging seemingly out of nowhere. (André looks the most shocked, even though he has warned others of the threat.) Despite the beastly intrusion, it's a slightly more obvious ending than the one John and Karen deserved – surely they should have been swallowed up by the earth, to become food for the grubs they've been so happy to see. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Zorina Fagott

Written by

Tom Geens

Director of

Photography

Sam Care

Editor

Alan Desauvage

Production Designer

Richard Campling

Music

BEAUX

Sound Recordist

Christophe Penchenat

Costume Designer

Angela Billows

BP&R Films Ltd./A

Private View/Les

Enragés/The British

Film Institute

Production

Companies

BFI presents

with the support

of the Flanders

Audiovisual Fund

(VAF) and the Région

Midi-Pyrénées

in partnership

with the CNC

in association

with Met Film and

with Met Film and

Burt Stull

and with the support

of the Belgian Tax

Shelter, iText Group

and iJL Productions

and the Chicken

Factory production

in co-production

with A Private View

and Les Enragés

Developed with the

support of the MEDIA

Programme of the

European Union

Developed in

collaboration with

Ateliers du Cinéma

European (ACE), an

initiative supported

by the MEDIA

Programme of the

European Union

Supported by

the Flanders

Audiovisual Fund

With the support

of the Belgian Tax

Shelter, the Région

Midi-Pyrénées

Made with the

support of the

BFI's Film Fund

Executive Producers

Lizzie Francke

Cavan Ash

Colette Delaney-

Smith

Cast

Paul Higgins

John

Kate Dickie

Karen

Jérôme Kircher

André

Corinne Masiero

Celine

Tristan Crom

pharmacist's son

Basile Regnoby

pharmacist's

son's friend

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Part-subtitled

Distributor

Verve Pictures

A forest in the French Pyrenees, present day. Middle-class Scottish couple John and Karen live a feral existence, subsisting on plants, grubs and rabbits. While John hunts, Karen spends her days in the hole that serves as their home. When Karen becomes ill, John goes to the town to get medicine. He's aided by André, a local farmer. Though John initially rebuffs André's further offers of help, the two become friends. Their interactions reveal that John and Karen have lived in the hole since their nearby house was destroyed in the fire that also killed their son; John tells André he wants to leave but Karen is

too traumatised. He enlists the help of André and his wife Céline to bring Karen out of the hole but she flees. André confesses that he accidentally destroyed their home when he lost control of a rubbish fire; John attacks him. Trying to force John and Karen away, Céline accidentally shoots Karen. John and Karen flee, with André in pursuit. Exhausted, Karen stops near the ruined house and dies; John takes her inside. André helps John build a pyre. John asks André to shoot him but before he can do so, a boar bursts out of a corner of the room. André looks on in bewilderment as fire consumes the house again.

Demolition

USA 2015

Director: Jean-Marc Vallée

Certificate 15 100m 45s

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

People react to bereavement in different ways, but investment banker Davis Mitchell (Jake Gyllenhaal) has a very particular response: he writes a letter to the operators of a malfunctioning vending machine in the hospital where his wife has just died after a car crash. Maybe he's discombobulated by grief, but what he knows is that he's really bugged by the way the machine took his money and then didn't give him his M&Ms.

So Bryan Sipe's screenplay makes a disarming start, as Davis fires off a series of missives, contextualising in amusing semi-formal language his tragic personal background to the said malfunction. For a while, the film beguiles simply by following its own nose towards another lost soul, Naomi Watts's Karen, the company's one-woman customer-service department. She's a single mum with a sexually confused teenage son, whose household becomes a refuge for Davis as he starts to get his head together. At this stage, Gyllenhaal's performance, with its uptight physicality and glassy stare, is particularly convincing in showing us a heretofore conforming Wall Street drone who suddenly realises that he's emotionally zonked. It's in finding a path back out of this funk, however, that both Gyllenhaal and the movie struggle.

'Show, don't tell' is a long-established filmmaking maxim, but here director Jean-Marc Vallée bends and twists it into 'Tell, then show': seeing a fallen tree, the newly self-aware Davis muses that "everything has become a metaphor for my life", whereupon the movie repeatedly illustrates its own title-flagged metaphor until the audience is virtually begging for mercy. Something similar unfolded in Vallée's previous offering *Wild (2014)*, in which Reese Witherspoon's valiant hiker announced she was going to "walk myself back to the woman my mother thought I was" and the film then showed us precisely that. But this new narrative of personal crisis and reconstruction takes its cue from the advice of Chris Cooper's ever-sincere father-in-law: "If you want to fix something, you have to take everything apart, then you can put it all together." Ergo, Davis soon has his office in bits, dismantles his leaky fridge, pays to work with a demolition crew and eventually sets about reducing his sleek, glass-walled suburban home to rubble.

It may be the case that, for some viewers, his dogged literalism is somehow played for laughs. Many who fail to warm to the story



Grief-stricken: Jake Gyllenhaal

of an abundantly wealthy middle-class white financial professional who just can't feel anything will find their resistance stiffened even more by the near-photographic detail of so much expensive designer gear getting smashed up before our eyes – all to make a thematic point that's already been over-laboured. Talk about hammering home an idea... And let's not get into the significant plot point involving (yes, really) a broken-down merry-go-round. Gyllenhaal's enduring likeability makes it all slightly more bearable, and Vallée's direction, packed with his trademark quicksilver cutting and classic-rock soundtrack clues, displays evident investment in the material. Yet for a filmmaker who's always been a risk-taker, this is one gambit that just doesn't come off. **C**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Liane Hoffman
Russ Smith
Rory Smith
Trent Swartzell
Sidney Kimmel
Jean-Marie Vallée

Written by
Bryan Speer

Director of Photography
Yves Bélanger

Edited by
Jay M. Gien

Production Designer
John Panto

Production Sound Mixer
Tom Nelson

Costume Designer
Lelli Katsnelson

Pictures, Black Label Media, Sidney Kimmel Entertainment
present a film by M. Judd
Black Label Media, Sidney Kimmel Entertainment production

Made in association with
TS2 Entertainment

Executive Producers
Dale Luckenbill
Dennis Schwartz
Carla Hacken
Bruce Tull
Nathan Ross
John Malkovich
James Van Der Beek
Helen Estroff
Film Extracts
Wild (2014)

Cast
Jake Gyllenhaal
Davis Mitchell
Naomi Watts
Karen Moreno
Dustin Diamond

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Finance LLC
Production Companies
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Phil
Judah Lewis
Chris
C.J. Wilson
Carl

Dolby Digital
In Colour
Prints by
Kodak
[2.35:1]

Distributor
20th Century Fox
International (UK)

Wall St investment broker Davis Mitchell loses his wife Julia in a car accident. Seemingly numb with grief, he begins writing a series of letters to the operators of a faulty hospital vending machine. Davis, who works for the company owned by his father-in-law Phil, surprises his colleagues by returning to his job soon after the funeral. Phil wants to create an educational trust in Julia's name and, concerned by Davis's erratic behaviour, suggests he take time to heal. Davis's letters to the vending company turn increasingly confrontational, prompting him to approach the customer service representative Karen Milano, the first, free-smoking woman, confused, androgynous teenage son Chris. Davis and Karen begin to confide in each other, sharing a seaside visit to an artisan's workshop where a broken merry-go-round is in storage. Davis, now bonding with Chris, takes to heart Phil's advice that when something's broken you must just take it apart and put it back together again. He starts dismantling his kitchen appliances, joins a demolition gang and eventually destroys the chic house he shared with Julia. This has a cathartic effect, enabling him to sign the trust fund documents for Phil; he causes uproar by inviting Karen to the black-tie funeral evening. Later, Davis is attacked by Karen's son Carl, and then by Chris, who has been out gay-bashing again. Davis makes his peace with everyone by using his insurance money to reopen the restored merry-go-round in Julia's memory.

Desert Dancer

United Kingdom/USA/Russia/Spain 2014
Director: Richard Raymond
Certificate 15 104m 2s

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

After opening intertitles inform us that Iran is "the birthplace of great poetry and the first chart of human rights", the initial image we see is a kick directed into the face of a prisoner under interrogation. This English-language biopic of Iranian dancer Afshin Ghaffarian makes its intentions clear early on: dramatic contrasts and sweeping gestures will be the order of the day.

It's not hard to understand what drew the British writing/directing duo Jon Croker and Richard Raymond to the material, since the story of a young Iranian who, after seeing Rudolph Nureyev on YouTube, was inspired to start an underground dance troupe, even staging a showpiece event at a secret desert location with an audience spirited out of Tehran for the occasion, is not only full of visual appeal but makes an evident stand for artistic expression in the face of religious repression. A pity really that the resulting movie just isn't as sharp or subtle as it needed to be, not least in its portrayal of Iran as a nation divided between bully-boy headline killjoys and free-spirited west-looking young lovelies, without much middle ground between.

Filmed in Morocco and the UAE and featuring a largely non-Iranian cast, it's a slightly ersatz affair, whose evident good intentions would count for a good deal more if its narrative didn't creak so much. The portrayal of the morality police as preening dandies with slicked-back hair and evil designs comes across as crass exaggeration; and Afshin and his cohorts' undeniably sincere project of running a modern dance class in an abandoned industrial unit away from the authorities' prying eyes perhaps counterproductively echoes the let's-put-the-show-on-in-the-barn school of movie musicals from Judy Garland and Gene Kelly through to Kevin Bacon's *Footloose* stand-off against churchgoing traditionalists.

In the circumstances, Freida Pinto's enigmatic



Step by step: Freida Pinto, Reece Ritchie

interloper Elaheh, whose dance skills attract Reece Ritchie's Afshin and inspire the rest of the gang to take the whole enterprise seriously, provides a telling reminder that western modes of dance actually had a strong imprint on pre-revolutionary Tehran, courtesy of the Iranian National Ballet. That Elaheh's ballerina mother passed on her skills to her daughter after the organisation was dismantled by the Islamic state brings a moment of distinctive and disarming detail in the film's otherwise somewhat generic conflict. However, the script then goes on to overplay its hand by making Elaheh a heroin addict without whom the protagonist must briskly deliver through cold turkey.

While the subsequent build-up of tension as the morality police sniff the trail rather grinds through the gears, when we actually get some proper dancing the whole picture springs into life. These are actors rather than trained dancers, and esteemed choreographer Akram Khan has succeeded in creating pieces that are physically expressive, evidently within a modern dance frame, yet also achievable by the hard-working cast. Special praise certainly goes to Ritchie for his powerful climactic solo showpiece, which only makes us wish the rest of the film had been this daring and skillfully delivered. **A**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Pippa Cross
Fabiola Beracasa
Izabella Miko
Luis Astorquia
Screenplay
Jon Croker
Based on the life story
of Afshin Ghaffarian
**Director of
Photography**
Carlos Catalan
Editors
Chris Gill
Celia Haining
Production Designer
Shahram Karimi
Music
Benjamin Wallfisch
Sound Recordist
Will Whaley
Costume Designer
Louise Stjernsward
Choreography
Akram Khan

©Desert Dancer
Productions Ltd
**Production
Companies**
Relativity Media,
May 13 Films and
Rostik Investment
Group present
in association

with Sarah Arison
Productions, Greene
Light Films, Blue
Pencil Set, Lipsync
Productions and 6
Sales a Crossday/
May 13 Films
production
Executive Producers
Sarah Arison
Ryan Kavanagh
Tucker Tooley
Jason Beckman
Sally Greene
Rodika
Zmkhnovskaya
Jeremy Cowdrey
Marina Fuentes
Arredonda
Mohammed Al Turki
Hamza Talhouni
Norman Merry
Peter Hampden
Rick Porras
Nigel Thomas
Film Extras
On the Waterfront
(1954)

Cast
Freida Pinto
Elaheh
Reece Ritchie
Afshin Ghaffarian

Tom Cullen
Ardi
Marama Corlett
Mona
Bamshad
Abedi-Amin
Mehran
Neet Mohan
Naser
Nazanin Boniadi
Parisa Ghaffarian
Simon Kassianides
Sattar
Davood Ghadami
Basij leader
Gabriel Senior
young Afshin
Ghaffarian
Makram J. Khoury
Mehdi

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor
Metrodome
Distribution Limited

Provincial Iran, the late 1990s. Teenager Afshin Ghaffarian, fascinated by western-style dance, attends an outward-looking arts centre, which tutor Mehdi describes as a world existing in parallel with Iran's Islamic society. Ten years later, Afshin is now at a Tehran university, where resourceful students evade the world's morality police to enjoy an underground Western culture. Afshin is recruited by friends to begin modern dance classes in an abandoned factory unit. The arrival of Elaeah – daughter of a ballerina in the pre-revolutionary Iranian National Ballet – prompts everyone to take the exercise more seriously. Afshin manages to get the troubled Elaeah off heroin and stage a dance piece in the desert, bussing out an appreciative audience for the occasion. Afshin is then seduced by a woman by the name of Mehr, who betrays him by being seduced by her brother to betray the group, when Afshin and friends return from a pro-reform election rally, they are attacked and beaten by police. Afshin is taken with other political prisoners to be killed in the desert, but escapes and returns to Tehran in hiding. His actor friend Nasr suggests that Afshin take his place in a production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; due to be staged during a cultural exchange festival in Paris. Afshin's mother, who has been in the West for years, Afshin makes his own pro-freedom dance protest during the performance, and then claims asylum.

Closing frames show the real Afshin, who continued his studies in France.

Despite the Falling Snow

United Kingdom/Canada 2015
Director: Shamim Sarif
Certificate 12A 93m 24s

Reviewed by Philip Kemp

For a novelist to adapt his or her novel for the screen can often offer hostages to fortune, as witness Salman Rushdie's pedestrian handling of his own *Midnight's Children* (2012). If that same writer goes on to direct the film, the risks multiply exponentially. The author Shamim Sarif would most likely disagree: all three of the features she's directed so far have been adapted by her from her own novels. Her first two features, *The World Unseen* (2007) and *I Can't Think Straight* (2008), hinged on cross-cultural lesbian love affairs. (Sarif herself is gay, married to her films' producer, Hanan Kattan.) But although a lesbian relationship features in *Despite the Falling Snow*, that isn't its chief motor; the main focus is the tragic love affair between Sasha, an idealistic young Soviet politician (Sam Reid), and Katya (Rebecca Ferguson), the young woman he falls in love with and marries, who proves to be spying for the US.

The timeline switches between Moscow circa 1960 (where, as the title warns us, it snows rather a lot) and New York/Moscow again 30 years later, with the now ageing Sasha (Charles Dance) trying to find out what happened to Katya after he defected. It's tempting to wonder briefly what John le Carré might have made of a plot like this, with its intertwining of erotic obsession, espionage and Cold War politics. What Sarif has made of it, unfortunately, is mush.

No blame should be attached to the cast, who struggle gamely with what they're given – all too frequently, crashingly banal lines such as, "I never wanted to hurt you" or, "I married you because I fell in love with you." Sasha, we learn, entered politics because he "wanted to make a difference", a line that even a US presidential candidate might hesitate to come out with. Ferguson makes a fair fist of her dual role: she plays both Katya and her American-born niece Lauren, who're told is an acclaimed artist – though the sole example we see of her work is a painting that Jack Vettriano



Treacherous conditions: Rebecca Ferguson

fans might think overly kitsch. Dance, reliable as ever, injects a note of gravitas, though he looks at least a decade too old to be Sam Reid 30 years on.

The plot turns on all kinds of improbable conveniences. The reason that Sasha, a relatively junior functionary in the Soviet ministry of defence, gets to see top-secret documents is that his boss is losing his sight and therefore needs someone to read to him; and Katya sees them because Sasha then takes them home and helpfully leaves them lying about. The film's besetting fault, though, is its tone, that of 1960s romantic fiction, from which it borrows many of its details and conventions. These days, isn't there something inherently fake about a movie where a married woman goes to bed wearing full makeup? ●

The Divide

United Kingdom 2015
Director: Katherine Round

Reviewed by Hannah McGill

The 2009 book *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* by Kate Pickett and Richard G. Wilkinson crunched international data on health and social development to support the thesis that the countries with the widest income differentials also offer the worst experience of life, not just to the poorest but to all their citizens. This documentary inspired by the book takes a more anecdotal, emotional approach, forgoing graphs and statistics in favour of presenting the stories of seven individuals as evidence of the effects of income and lifestyle disparity. All are from the United States and the UK, countries with large differentials between richest and poorest – the film doesn't address those countries deemed by Wilkinson and Pickett's measures to be most content.

Those we visit include Darren from Possilpark in Glasgow, an area with one of the UK's lowest life expectancies; Rochelle, a Newcastle care worker on a zero-hours contract; Keith, long-term incarcerated in America under the 'three strikes and you're out' law; Alden, a hyper-driven, high-earning New York psychologist; and Leah, a widowed single mother who dodges phone calls from debt collectors while working at Kentucky Fried Chicken. In between glimpses of their lives and accounts of how they got to where they are, the film details the expansion in wealth disparity in the US and UK in the wake of the deregulation of the 1980s; the boom in cheap loans and mortgages over the 1990s; the vastly increased salaries and bonuses awarded in certain highly valued professions such as banking; and the devastating effects of the 2008 stock market crash.

It's necessary for the film's narrative that everyone we see is suffering due to inequality, and so the rich people we meet are impoverished in their own way. Alden rarely sees his wife and children, and obsesses about protecting his family from crime. Jen, meanwhile, who lives in a lavishly appointed gated community with her husband and two small children, is lonely, rejected by her wealthy peers and bemused by the luxury around her. There's something unsatisfying about this aspect of the storytelling: plenty of people, after all, are very pleased to be well off, and live exactly where they want to. Nor does the film address hard questions about how exactly wealth distribution could or should work in practice. A clip of Tony Blair debating with Jeremy Paxman exactly how earnings might be capped to prevent people from getting rich is positioned as grisly New Labour pro-avariciousness, and the audience with whom I saw the film duly laughed; but it's a query to which the film could have done with allotting a little more serious consideration.

The film's strength, however, is in its testimonies of poverty, which address different life experiences – from crime and addiction to ill health, business failure and simple misfortune – but together present a powerful united front against any claim that a level playing-field exists in terms of opportunities to accrue wealth or even stability. The film also highlights the sheer diversity of personalities and ways of being that make up even a tiny sample of humanity – and in doing so directly

Credits and Synopsis

Producer
Hanan Kattan

Written for the Screen by
Shamim Sarif

Based upon her novel
Cinematography

David Johnson

Editor
Masahiro Hirakubo

Production Design
@Falling Snow Ltd

Bill Crutcher
Mina Buric

Composer
Richard Portman

Production
Sound Mixer
Nenad Vukobratovic

Costume Design
Monika Balovic

Production Companies
Enlightenment Productions presents in association with SK Enlightenment

Films Canada a film by Shamim Sarif

Executive Producers
Ben White
Hanan Kattan

Lisa Tchengul
Katherine Priestley

Cast

Rebecca Ferguson
Katya Grinkova/
Lauren Grinkova

Sam Reid
young Alexander Ivanov, Sasha

Antje Traue
Marina Rinskaya

Oliver Jackson-Cohen
young Misha Ardonov

Thure Lindhardt
Dmitri

Anthony Head
older Misha Ardonov

Charles Dance
older Alexander

Ivanov, Sasha'
In Colour
(1.85:1)

Distributor
Attitude Film Distribution

The action takes place in New York and Moscow between the late 1950s and the early 1990s.

New York, 1961. Attending a US/Soviet peace delegation, Soviet delegate Sasha Ivanov defects to the west; he demands to know whether his wife Katya will be able to join him. In 1992, Sasha is living in New York. He is alarmed to hear that his niece Lauren, an artist, is travelling to Moscow for an exhibition of her work; she intends to find out what became of Katya. In 1959 Moscow, Sasha's friend Misha invites him to a party where he meets the beautiful Katya. Unknown to Sasha, Misha is spying for the US and plans to use Katya to ensnare Sasha, whose boss Dmitri is losing his sight and often gives Sasha top-secret documents to read for him. Sasha and Katya fall in love and are married.

In 1990s Moscow, Lauren meets political

journalist Marina; the two are attracted to each other. Marina promises to help Lauren find out about Katya. They find Misha living in drunken squalor; he threatens them with a gun.

Moscow, 1961. Katya confesses to Sasha that she's a spy, but protests that she really loves him. She persuades him to defect during the forthcoming delegation to New York and promises to join him.

Moscow, 1992. Sasha arrives, worried about Lauren. Marina reveals that she's Dmitri's daughter; he was shot after Sasha defected, and she accuses Sasha of being responsible for his death. Lauren takes Sasha to her exhibition. Misha arrives and confesses that he was arrested by the KGB; to save himself, he betrayed Katya, and when she tried to escape he shot her dead. He gives Sasha the last letter that Katya wrote to him.



The great divider: Keith

confronts the notion that wealth is a reward for being a particularly sparky or resourceful person. It's a blunt but unavoidable truth that some of the wealthiest people seen here seem hollow in terms of their inner lives, while some of the worst-off buzz with charisma. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Katherine Round
Inspired by *The Spirit Level* a book
by Richard Wilkinson
and Kate Pickett
Director of Photography
Woody James
Edited by
John Mosier
Original Music
Andrew Hewitt
Sound Recordists

Eric Burge
Francisco LaTorre
Charles McGovern
Glen Pignatelli
©The Spirit Level
Film Company
Limited
Production Companies
Dartmouth Films
in association with
Literally Films
Executive Producer

Christopher Hind
In Colour
[1.78:1]
Distributor
Dartmouth Films

A documentary in which the life experiences of seven individuals are contextualised with comment on economic conditions in the UK and US since the Thatcher and Reagan governments of the 1980s deregulated financial markets and established a culture that encouraged personal debt.

Alden works as a psychologist on Wall Street, with many clients in the banking sector; he puts in long hours and rarely sees his wife or children. Leah from Virginia works at Kentucky Fried Chicken and raises her teenage daughter alone. Jen, her husband and children live in a lavish but unfriendly gated community in California. Prisoner Keith discusses what incarceration has done to his view of humanity. Janet once ran her own video store but now works for the company that put her out of business, Walmart. In the UK, Darren lives in one of Glasgow's poorest areas and fights alcohol addiction; and Rochelle in Newcastle is a care worker on a zero-hours contract who uses credit cards to feed and clothe her children.

Eisenstein in Guanajuato

The Netherlands/Mexico/Finland/Belgium/Germany 2015
Director: Peter Greenaway

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

Poor Sergei Eisenstein. Poor, poor Sergei Eisenstein. First *Battleship Potemkin* sinks without a whisper from the *Sight & Sound* all-time top 10 list, and now this. That Peter Greenaway's *Eisenstein in Guanajuato* is going to be a miscalibrated botch is evident in approximately the first three minutes, in which we 'see' the Mexican countryside – the spiny maguey plants at *la Orozco* and the Dr Atl landscapes – through the eyes of the Russian director (played by Elmer Bäck), arriving in a motorcade and looking disconcertingly like John C. Reilly's Dr Steve Brule character. And so for the better part of two hours we lumber through something that isn't really a film at all, but a look book, a pastiche of images relating to Eisenstein, like the research for a film yet to be made.

There were, however, moments when I was able to find *Eisenstein in Guanajuato* even slightly touching – not as a story about human foibles, for Greenaway has never encouraged or succeeded in fostering identification at that level – but as the tribute of one out-of-vogue director to another. Greenaway's film depicts Eisenstein during the preparation and shooting of his ill-fated *¡Que viva México!* The final results of this excursion, fragments rather than the intended masterwork, may safely claim to be the most influential uncompleted movie ever made, a compendium of quintessentially Mexican imagery culled from direct observation and the prints of José Guadalupe Posada that created a template from which future Mexican film artists would work – the careers of Emilio Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa, for example, are hard to imagine without it.

We might say that the case of *¡Que viva México!* is one where the potent images of a film demanded to be seen. *Eisenstein in Guanajuato*, however, seems to have no urgent calling save to perpetuate the Greenaway brand and take up festival slots. Greenaway, who has struggled to relocate the mass audience of *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*



Going south: Luis Alberti, Elmer Bäck

(1989), has a salacious take on Eisenstein's Mexican adventure, paralleling this artistic blossoming with his belated sexual awakening. Greenaway imagines this to have occurred courtesy of Eisenstein's Mexican guide, the compact and suave Palomino (Luis Alberti), who relieves the *Ivan the Terrible* director of his anal virginity in an extended sequence involving olive oil and a Soviet flag.

As conjured by Greenaway and the Finnish actor Bäck, Eisenstein is a name-dropping motormouth with a promiscuous, free-wheeling mind and a self-deprecating, cloddish, accident-prone demeanour, a bit like a Bolshevik Baby Huey. (His lone white suit is subjected to untold horrors from the moment he arrives in Mexico.) He also extravagantly rolls his Rs, and has plenty of opportunity to do so when savouring the enunciation of, say, "Russian rabbi". Greenaway's presentation of the material leans heavily on grating effects, employing restless 360-degree pans, freeze-frames, triptych screens, animations of Eisenstein's erotic drawings and the frequent incursion of archival photographs. Eisenstein's known biographical details are reviewed in long sequence shots in luxurious environments, in which nary a point is overlooked save for why all of this research didn't just go into a perfectly respectable Taschen coffee-table book. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Producers
Bruno Felix
Femke Wolting
San Fu Mattha
Cristina Velasco L.
Written by
Peter Greenaway
Director of Photography
Renier van Brummelen
Editor
Elmer Leupen
Art Direction
Ana Solares
Direct Sound
Raul Locatelli
Pablo Jarama
Costume Designer

Brenda Gómez
©Submarine, Fu Works, Paloma Negra Films S. de RL. de CV, Edith Film, Potemkin
Production Companies
Submarine, Fu Works & Paloma Negra Films present
In co-production with
Edith Film, Potemkin, Mollywood
In association with
VPRO, YLE, ZDF/Arte
Supported by
Netherlands Film Fund, Netherlands

Film Production
Incentive, Estimote
Fiscal Article 226 de la Ley (Elcine), Schneider Electric México, Grupo Beta San Miguel, Dr. José Pinto, Finnish Film Fund, Enterprise Flanders, Screen Flanders, Flanders Audiovisual Fund, The Shelter of the Federal Government of Belgium and Tax Shelter Investors
A film by Peter Greenaway
A co-production by

Submarine, Fu Works, Paloma Negra Films
Developed with support from the MEDIA Programme of the European Union
With the participation of Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (Conaculta), Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE)
Film Extracts
Que viva México! (raw footage) (1930)
Oktobri/October (1928)
Stachka/Strike

(1925)
Bronnecets
Potemkin/Battleship Potemkin (1925)
City Lights (1931)
Un chien andalou (1929)
Cast
Elmer Bäck
Sergei Eisenstein
Luis Alberti
Palomino Cañedo
José Montini
Diego Rivera
Cristina Velasco
Lazaro
Frida Kahlo

Maya Zapata
Concepción Cañedo
Lisa Owen
Mary Craig Sinclair
Stelo Savante
Hunter Kimbrough
In Colour & Black and White
[2.35:1]
Distributor
Axiom Films
International Limited

Mexico, 1931. The celebrated Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, after an extended sojourn in Hollywood, has driven down to Mexico with the intention of making a film, backed by leftwing American novelist Upton Sinclair. Set up in a luxury hotel in Guanajuato, Eisenstein is soon matched with a pale, dashing professor of comparative religions Palomino Cañedo. Shortly after arriving, Eisenstein goes on a catastrophic mescal-fuelled drinking session, during which the ghostly beauty of Mexico is revealed to him. Research trips take Eisenstein to cemeteries and to the Museo de

las Momias. He grows close to Cañedo and his family. This closeness begins to shade into flirtation when Eisenstein and Cañedo take a nude siesta together, and the tension finally boils over one night when Cañedo relieves the 33-year-old Eisenstein of his virginity. They become inseparable companions, until Eisenstein is visited by Mary Craig Sinclair, wife of his financier, and her brother, who have come to Mexico to look after the investment. They deliver an ultimatum to Eisenstein, and apply pressure by preventing the renewal of his visa, forcing him to leave Mexico, and Cañedo, in tears.

Eye in the Sky

United Kingdom 2015
Director: Gavin Hood
Certificate 15 102m12s

Reviewed by Matthew Taylor

Eye in the Sky, a largely gripping, near real-time political thriller from director Gavin Hood, begins not up in the firmament but solidly on terra firma. On the outskirts of Nairobi, an innocent family go about their business, albeit under the watchful eye of the Islamist militants who have wrested control of their district. It's then that the camera takes flight, ascending to the bird's-eye perspective that will become the default view for many of the film's disparately located observers.

This is the ever contentious arena of drone warfare, a contemporary *bête noire* recently addressed by Andrew Niccol's *Good Kill* (2014), as well as by war-on-terror TV sagas *Homeland* and *24*. Unlike the delicious narratives of the latter, Hood's film forgoes hyperbole in its exacting dissection of an unfolding crisis scenario and the moral hand-wringing that it elicits. Although not overly nuanced, it's certainly more assured and less heavy-handed than the director's previous look at controversial foreign policy, 2007's *Rendition*. There's also, in Guy Hibbert's deft script, a disarming element of force undercutting the agonised political vacillations and chronic hierarchical buck-passing on display.

Shot in Hood's native South Africa, *Eye in the Sky* focuses on a fraught few hours for military personnel, politicians and civilians, as what at first seems a straightforward capture operation – of a British woman affiliated with the Somali jihadist group Al-Shabaab – transforms into a targeted assassination with a high risk of collateral damage. A lazier film might have frequently cut away to the terrorists in their safe house as they prepare an imminent atrocity, but Hood wisely opts to place us squarely alongside the watchers, and thus at a crucial remove from events.

The film moves fluently between four key locations: a hi-tech intelligence base in Surrey, where Helen Mirren's driven colonel oversees the operation; a Cobra meeting in Whitehall, as Alan Rickman's jaded lieutenant-general debates with government ministers; the Nevada base where drone pilots Aaron Paul and Phoebe Fox await instructions; and the mean streets of Nairobi, as Barkhad Abdi's field agent conducts perilous surveillance. It's a credit to Megan



Come spy with me: Helen Mirren

Gill's sharp editing that the segues between these wildly contrasting spaces – from the pilots' claustrophobic quarters to the plush Whitehall chambers – never feel jarring.

Abdi's nervy incursions into hostile territory provide the film with its most conventional suspense material, while some ingenious business with animatronic birds and bugs containing spy cameras seems more in line with the antics of *Get Smart* or *Mission Impossible* than the cool verisimilitude affected elsewhere. More sustained tension is wrung out of the dithering and deliberating of those in authority, as it dawns on them that a no-win situation is on the cards. Hibbert brings caustic – and sometimes wholly unexpected – wit to these tortuous bureaucratic exchanges, as decisions are funnelled through various political and legal channels. Those with the most responsibility are often shown to be absent or preoccupied. Meanwhile a desperate call to the US secretary of state merely proves an irritating interruption from the ping-pong tournament he's attending in Beijing.

As in *Good Kill*, the psychological toll is felt most keenly by those following orders from higher up – the harrowed pilots, the military underlings pressured into massaging collateral-damage figures. However, all are tainted somehow by what ultimately transpires. Having built up their intricate narrative, Hood and Hibbert offer no decisive conclusions. Then again, that seems apt for what's often an effective approximation of the decentralised, uncertain nature of modern counterterrorism. **B**

Feast of Varanasi

United Kingdom 2016
Director: Rajan Kumar Patel
Certificate 15 94m27s

Reviewed by Naman Ramchandran

Class divisions in the ancient Indian holy city of Varanasi have been well explored in films such as *Raanjhanaa* (2013) and *Banaras* (2006), while white women seeking catharsis in India have long been a cliché, with examples including *Heat and Dust* (1983), *Holy Smoke* (1999) and *Eat Pray Love* (2010). Rajan Kumar Patel attempts to meld the two in *Feast of Varanasi*, his first film, and also adds in dollops of mysticism and a serial-killer tale. The result is a typical debut movie in which the director puts too many loaves in the oven, leading to a half-baked product.

The film begins promisingly enough with two journeys. Arjun, an officer with the Central Bureau of Investigation and a member of the underprivileged Dalit caste, travels back to his hometown of Varanasi to solve a series of killings of Dalit women; teacher Helen goes there from London to meet her aunt and inform her of the suicide of her mother, while also seeking refuge from the trauma of an abusive childhood. Arjun strikes up a bond with local policeman Rajveer, and Helen finds solace with mysterious mendicant Nana, a member of the wandering Aghori, who seek release from the Hindu cycle of reincarnation. As a setting for death, Varanasi is appropriate, since it is the place many Indians go to die, or have their last rites performed, in the belief that they will go to heaven.

The film's multiple strands do not coalesce and the resolutely orientalist tone jars. There is a lesson in Hindu mythology provided by a Sanskrit professor; an explanation of the Aghori sect



Magical mystery tour: Archana Gupta

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Ged Doherty
Colin Firth
David Lancaster
Written by
Guy Hibbert
Director of Photography
Hans Zimmer
Editor
Megan Gill
Production Designer
Johnny Bredt
Music
Paul Hopker
Mark Kilian
Sound Recorder
Nicol Low
Costume Designer
Roy Filipe
©One Films (EITS) Limited Production Companies

Entertainment One Features presents a Raindog Films, Entertainment One Features production A Gavin Hood film Developed by BBC Northern Ireland Executive Producers
Xavier Marchand
Benedict Carver
Claudia Blumhuber
Anne Sheehan
Guy Hibbert
Stephen Wright

Cast
Helen Mirren
Colonel Katherine Powell
Aaron Paul
Steve Watts
Alan Rickman
Lieutenant General

Frank Benson
Barkhad Abdi
Jama Farah
Jeremy Northam
Brian Woodside
Iain Glen
James Willett
Phoebe Fox
Carrie Sermon
Lex King
Susan Danford
Ayesha Al-Hadi
Aisha Takow
Alia Mo'Allem

Dolby Digital In Colour [2.35:1]

Distributor
EI Films

Present day. From a Surrey military base, Colonel Katherine Powell supervises a covert operation in Nairobi, Kenya. The objective is to capture Susan Danford, aka Ayesha Al-Hadi, a British national and member of Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab. Field agent Jama Farah tracks Danford's group to a safe house, where it becomes clear that a suicide attack is being planned for elsewhere in the city. Powell requests that the mission be changed to eliminate Danford's group with a drone strike. Powell's liaison in Whitehall, Lieutenant General Frank Benson, insists on this action, but the decision is delayed by political and legal wrangling. With clearance finally granted, a young girl, Alia, unexpectedly starts selling bread outside the safe house. Drone pilot Steve Watts refuses to launch the strike. With the suicide bombers readying to leave the house, Powell pressures an underling to doctor his estimation of collateral damage from a strike. After more deliberation, the strike goes ahead, killing the terrorists. However, Alia is caught in the blast and later dies from her injuries.

God's Not Dead 2

USA 2015
Director: Harold Cronk

Reviewed by Kim Newman

The sting of being depicted as the bad guys in the 1955 play and 1960 film *Inherit the Wind* – an account of the 1925 'monkey trial' in which educator John Scopes was prosecuted for teaching the theory of evolution in violation of a Tennessee state law – has evidently lasted a long time in American fundamentalist Christian circles. Here's a more or less exact remake... only now the teacher in the dock is accused of promulgating Christianity and the forces of oppression are evil atheists.

A follow-up to Harold Cronk's critically reviled, commercially successful *God's Not Dead* (2014) – which featured classroom debates rather than an actual trial – this follows such 'faith-based' films as the *Left Behind* and *Apocalypse* series by catering to a fundamentalist self-image of Christians as an oppressed minority in godless modern America. *Apocalypse IV: Judgment* (2017) also took a legal approach, using the tagline 'Supreme Court vs Supreme Being', but that had the excuse of taking place after the Rapture, when the Antichrist was ruler of the world.

The *God's Not Dead* films seem instead to take place in an alternative universe where fundamentalist churches aren't hugely politically powerful in America, and where no one mentions gay marriage, abortion, creation science or sex education. Here, the American Civil Liberties Union is a militant atheist organisation that retains satanic lawyer Pete Kane (played by Ray Wise, in a hugely entertaining turn, as the incarnation of smirking evil) to crush the embattled Christian heroine. The whole apparatus of law and government is directed against people of faith, with a simmering subplot – ready for *God's Not Dead 3* – as bumbling, luckless Pastor Dave refuses to turn his sermons over to a sneering official and is dragged off by the cops after the end credits.

In addition to the straightforward issue of what the heroine said in class that so shocks her colleagues, there are detours about the case for belief in the historical Jesus, with experts cast as themselves hawking their books from the stand. There are also held-over subplots



Jesse Metcalfe, Melissa Joan Hart

from the first film: formerly atheist reporter Amy Ryan (Trisha LaRache) has turned to God now that her cancer is in remission, and has cosy phone chats with Christian stadium rock act Newsboys, who cheerfully encourage their fans to pray for teacher Grace but don't think to support her case by, say, paying for a lawyer, and new convert Martin Yip (Paul Kwo) is hilariously disowned by his stern (presumably communist) father when he decides he wants to become a pastor and take the word of the Lord to China.

An inevitable camp streak comes from the casting of familiar faces from yesteryear. As Grace, Melissa Joan Hart, once identified with alternative spirituality as Sabrina the teenage witch, purses her lips and suffers in court, but is encouraged when her pupils turn up to serenade her with 'How Great Thou Art' (which at least saves her from having to listen to the excruciatingly MOR Newsboys). Ex-*Ghostbuster* Ernie Hudson plays it neutral as the judge. A *Rage in Harlem's* femme fatale Robin Givens goes into full-on fiend mode as the principal of Dr Martin Luther King Jr High School, and venerable Christian crooner Pat Boone shuffles joyously as he personally thanks God (rather than the jury and a shameless piece of courtroom grandstanding) for finding his granddaughter not guilty. ■

complete with a picture book and text on screen; some basic philosophising, including an inversion of Racine's 'I have everything, yet have nothing' quote; and a disquisition on Hindu wedding rituals. There are thus many ideas at play here but they sit uneasily with the central theme of a serial killer on the loose. There is also the question of logic. While the motivation for the serial killer's actions can be swallowed by minds open to extreme spiritualism, there is no apparent reason for Helen being in jeopardy. Also, given the sexual violence against women in India today, it is difficult to believe that she would time and again merrily visit the sinister and half-naked Nana in a forest and allow him to give her intoxicating drinks.

Nevertheless, Patel deserves credit for bluntness laying out the horrors the Dalit community endures in India, and also for creating a believably sombre atmosphere in a city that is otherwise bursting with colour and vitality, despite being a place of death. It's a valiant attempt for a filmmaker with no previous experience in the medium, not even a short. ■

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Caroline O'Reilly
Rajan Kumar Patel
Written by
Rajan Kumar Patel
Based on [his] novel
Director of
Photography
James Aspinall
Editor
Sagar Baran
Art Director
Abhishek
Raman Singh
Original Score
Composer
Anne Doherty
Production
Sound Mixer
Pramesh Shukla
Costume Designers
Chetna Rawat
Kinnearing Kippen

Production Companies
RAA Film Arts and
Draught Film
present a film by
Rajan Kumar Patel
A Draught Film
and RAA Films
International production

Nana
Prashant Prakash
Kasi
Neha Mahajan
Maya
Amar Talwar
CBI Assistant
Director Singh
Utkarsh Mazumdar
Professor Sharma

In Colour
[LSD]
Part-subtitled

Distributor
Independent
Distribution

Varanasi, India, the present. The Central Bureau of Investigation has sent Delhi-based officer Arjun (who is from the underprivileged Dalit caste and originally from Varanasi) to look into a spate of killings of Dalit women who are being burnt to death. Schoolteacher Helen, who has had an abused childhood, arrives in Varanasi from London after the suicide of her mother to visit her aunt Agatha. Local policeman Rajveer helps Arjun in his investigation. The next victim is Maya, a friend of Arjun. Agatha reveals that Helen is in fact her own biological daughter. Helen finds solace with the mysterious mendicant Nana, who helps her forget her childhood and current traumas. Rajveer reveals to Arjun that she was also born a Dalit but changed her name to avoid the oppression that comes with being part of the caste. The investigation leads Arjun and Rajveer to Kasi, a photographer from the privileged Brahmin caste who secretly married a Dalit woman and went mad with grief when her family then married her to somebody else and she committed suicide. Nana promised Kasi that he would be reunited with her in the afterlife if he married and burnt to death six Dalit women. Kasi kidnaps Rajveer and burns her to death. The police find Kasi and shoot him dead. Nana renders Helen unconscious and is preparing to burn her alive when Arjun arrives. In the ensuing struggle, Helen regains consciousness and shoots both men fall into the fire. The next day, Helen thinks she spots Nana in the city. The body found in the fire cannot be conclusively identified as Arjun's.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Michael Scott
David A.R. White
Russell Wolfe
Elizabeth Travis
Brittany Lifeberg
Written by
Chuck Konstantin
Cary Solomon
Director of
Photography
Brian Granley
Edited by
Vance Null
Production Designer
Michael Crisp
Music
Will Musser
Sound Mixer
Michael Arman
Costume Designer
Cami Nemarich

Production Companies
Pure Pix presents a
Pure Pix production

In association with 10
West Studios, Mtnry
FX, Q&Q Media
Group and Believe
Entertainment
Executive Producers
Robert Katz
Troy Dixon

Cast
Melissa Joan Hart
Grace Wesley
Jesse Metcalfe
Tom Corder
David A.R. White
Rev. Dave
Hayley Orrantia
Brooke Twilley
Ernie Hudson
Judge Stennis
Robin Givens
Principal Kinney
Fred Dalton
Thompson
Pastor Henry
Marie Camelo

Barriers
Catherine Thawley
Sadie Robertson
Marlene
Pat Boone
Walter Wesley
Ray Wise
Pete Kane
Trisha LaRache
Amy Ryan
Paul Kwo
Martin Yip

In Colour

Distributor
Kaleidoscope Film
Distribution

Hope Springs, US, present day. Christian high-school teacher Grace Wesley responds to a question from pupil Brooke Twilley by citing Jesus as an influence on Martin Luther King; this leads to Grace being suspended from her job. Pete Kane, a high-powered Christian-hating lawyer, is retained by the American Civil Liberties Union and persuades Brooke's parents to sue Grace for preaching in the classroom. Lowly public defender Tom Endler argues that Grace was talking about Jesus only as a historical figure and therefore hasn't broken the law. Meanwhile Pastor Dave, one of the jurors, is troubled by a state policy that requires him to turn over transcripts of his sermons to the authorities. Brooke defies her parents and takes the stand to testify on Grace's behalf, but admits that Grace talked about Christianity with her off school grounds at a time when she was coping with the death of her brother. Dave falls ill and is replaced by an alternate juror who looks like a goth punk but is in fact a Christian. Tom breaks his own client down on the stand, prompting the jury to sympathise and find her not guilty. Dave is arrested for contempt of court.

The Grump

Finland/Iceland/Germany/Norway 2014
Director: Dome Karukoski
Certificate 12A 102m 12s

Reviewed by Catherine Wheatley

The whistle-stop tour of Finnish history that opens Dome Karukoski's endearing *The Grump* will skate over the heads of most international audiences. Little matter: the film's fish-out-of-water premise is familiar enough. Thrust into the cosmopolitan maelstrom when an ankle injury forces him to abandon his farm for a clinic in Helsinki, the eponymous hero struggles to negotiate the trendy lifestyle led by his son's family in much the same way as Paddington wrestled with British mores, or Borat those of modern America. It's not just migrants who find themselves in a muddle in the modern west – for those who live in the past as well, the present is a foreign country.

The Grump (unnamed in the film) misses a time when "skis were made of wood and men of iron", when young people didn't wear a helmet "just to go to the fridge". He is befuddled by the very fact that his daughter-in-law (Mari Perankoski) has a career, never mind all the mod cons that fill her minimalist duplex, or her habit of drinking herbal tea rather than his habitual coffee. His confrontation with millennial life cues in a series of comic set pieces which turn, for the most part, around his politically incorrect views on women and Russians and his inability to manipulate modern technology, although the biggest laughs come from the slapstick attempts of his browbeaten son (Ilkka Forss) to impress his dad with a spot of tree surgery.

Beleaguered, bluff, squinting, snorting and sporting a bear-fur trapper's hat, veteran Finnish actor Antti Litja, reprising the role he played in the radio adaptation of Tuomas Kyrö's popular stories, bears an uncanny resemblance to Tom Wilkinson. His character, though, is a variant on the crabby old man that Jack Nicholson has specialised in over the past two decades in films such as *As Good As It Gets* (1997) and *About Schmidt* (2002). But the Grump is a rather more sentimental man than, say, Melvin Udall or Warren Schmidt. A final flashback triggered by the smell of fresh-baked sugar buns chronicles 53 years spent building a house, life and family with the woman who now lies senile in a hospital bed. The bittersweet coda reframes the Grump's



Man of the past: Antti Litja

disdain for modern consumer culture, shifting it from mere miserliness to fear of a world that dispenses with people as swiftly as it does plastic cups from overpriced fast-food franchises.

Happily, Karukoski holds back from indulging in the same nostalgia as his protagonist, sympathising with some of his bewilderment but giving short shrift to his sanctimony. The daughter-in-law and son are each offered one glorious moment of retort: incandescent with rage, the former admonishes him, "You won't drag me back to the woods, I've come out of them"; the latter more pithily dismisses him as a "fucking old fart".

The film has been accused of parochialism but this is a work in which the minutiae matter. Pini Hellstedt's cinematography, which juxtaposes panoramic pastoral scenes with a Helsinki shot almost entirely in medium close-up, elegantly captures the myopia of the middle classes. The objects that populate the worlds of *The Grump's* characters also speak wordlessly to their lives, from the cardboard boxes into which one old man packs up a lifetime's worth of crosswords ripped from newspapers, to the Dali-esque clock on the son and daughter-in-law's wall. With its numbers all jumbled up, making it utterly impossible to tell the time, it's a baffling concept in any language. Ⓔ

Heaven Knows What

USA 2014
Directors: Josh Safdie, Benny Safdie

Reviewed by Hannah McGill

Depictions of drug addiction frequently favour a stylised approach – perhaps because a degree of theatricality reflects the addict's self-dramatising, self-deluding mindset, and perhaps because people simply scrabbling for drugs and getting high is regarded as too bleak and repetitive a watch. Hence the headlong dive into comedic fantasy in *Trainspotting* (1996), the techno-fuelled grand guignol of *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) and the gushy love poetry of *Candy* (2006).

Heaven Knows What, based on a memoir by its lead actress Arielle Holmes, takes a less escapist view, and feels more authentic and more punishing as a result. The film isn't without its concessions to style: the sound design, which allows forbidding electronic music to bleed over scenes and to obscure dialogue, gives a hint of how the sensory demands of a drug life, at once enveloping and ravaging, drown out the characters' better judgement; and love poetry gets a look-in too, in the form of the desperately flowery missives that Holmes's character Harley writes to her boyfriend Ilya (Caleb Landry Jones). Both the drug high and the love high, however, are stripped of romantic gloss here. Seeing Harley blissed out with bottle of water in hand and dance music pumping, we briefly assume she's having a great time in a club, before the scene unfolds to show us that she's just nodding out in a park while some other junkies fight nearby. Her love for Ilya, meanwhile, is no bold rejection of society's oppressive bourgeois expectations, but grim self-enslavement to a destructive force – a human embodiment of her addiction.

"Everything that I am today came from you," she tells him, in one of her double-edged billets-doux. That the film declines to let us delude ourselves – that this love is truly special, that this way of living is wild and free rather than squalid and sad, that some magic moment of insight is going to save anybody from themselves – makes it



Damage done: Arielle Holmes, Caleb Landry Jones

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Markus Selin
Jukka Helle
Written by
Tuomas Kyrö
Dome Karukoski
Cinematography
Pini Hellstedt

Edited by
Hani Vilanen
Production Design
Betsy Angerman-Engström
Original Music
Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson
Sound Design
Tuomas Klabou
Costume Design
Anna Vilppunen

©Solar Films
Production Companies
Kisi Production

Neutros Productions, Suomen Elokuvasäätiö, Nordisk Film & TV Fond, Icelandic Film Centre, MTV3, Nordisk Film

Cast
Antti Litja
the grump
Petra Frey
the wife
Mari Perankoski
the daughter-in-law
Ilkka Forss
the son

In Colour
[2.35:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
Cinefil

Finnish theatrical title
Meidän pahaolija

Finland, the present. An elderly man lives alone in the countryside. He tends to his farmland and visits his senile wife in hospital. After a fall, he is referred to a hospital in Helsinki while awaiting treatment he stays with his intellectual son and high-flying daughter-in-law. The old man is infuriated by his daughter-in-law's modern lifestyle; she is frustrated by his politically incorrect views. When she has to attend an unexpected meeting with some Russian businessmen, she is forced to bring along her father-in-law. Although the elderly man's no-nonsense ways appeal to the Russians, he scuppers the deal. His daughter-in-law is enraged when he brings home a homeless man as a guest-cum-handyman. The old man leaves for the hospital. However, on learning that his daughter-in-law has left his son, he returns to the house and confronts the younger man. Following an argument, during which the father says that his own wife also once left him, the son smashes up his father's beloved Ford Escort. The daughter-in-law returns home and asks forgiveness. The family, including the elderly man, is reunited.

The Last Man on the Moon

United Kingdom 2015
Director: Mark Craig
Certificate PG 95m 52s

grinding to watch. "I'm tired of caring," Harley shouts early in the narrative, and the viewer may already be feeling similarly. These are mean, bitter, self-involved characters, who lurch from one bad decision to another and respond with ugly cruelty to the occasional flashes of kindness shown by others. The sheer awfulness of Ilya colours the central romance with shocking gloom – how can we root for Harley's happiness with a man who begins the film by goading her into cutting her wrists? When the couple board a bus to Florida together, hints emerge of both the ambiguous romantic flight that closes *The Graduate* (1967) and Ratso's failure to get to Miami in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) – though a more direct and telling movie reference is the earlier brief glimpse of a gore-soaked moment from *Hellraiser* (1987).

For all the raw horror it depicts, however, *Heaven Knows* What is skilful at showing hope while offering little of it, laying bare its characters' brokenness without denying their humanity. At one point the camera closes in on Harley's bitten, dirty and trembling fingertips as she tries and fails to thread a needle to mend Ilya's jacket – an exquisitely judged moment that shows her desperation and her failure to connect the hopelessness of her love, and the tenacity of her investment in it; the needle and the damage done. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Oscar Boyson Sebastian Bear McClard Joah Salfie Benny Salfie Screenplay Ronald Bronstein Joah Salfie Based on the novel <i>Mad Love</i> in New York City by Anelle Holmes	Production Companies Iconoclast presents an Elara picture Executive Producers Charles Marie Anthony Mouad Belkaddar Joah Duhamel Nicolas Thermitte	Yuri Pleskun Tommy, drug dealer Diana Singh Diana Benjamin Antoine Hampton Antoine Colour by Nico Shoes (L783)
Distributor Axiom Films International Limited	Cast Arielle Holmes Harley Caleb Lindry Jones Ilya Buddy Durness Mike Nicore Skully Elanore Hendricks Erica Marey Agula Evan	

New York City, the present. After a fight with her boyfriend Ilya, homeless heroin addict Harley offers to prove her love for him by killing herself. He encourages her, and she cuts her wrist with a razor-blade. Ilya leaves her to be taken to hospital alone. After a spell on a psychiatric ward, Harley returns to the streets. She rejects an old friend, Skully, in order to pass her time with dealer Mike, crashing with a sympathetic older woman, Diana, and pandering for drug money during the day. Ilya harasses her, which leads to a fight between him and Mike, in the course of which he stabs Mike in the hand. Harley tells Mike that she still loves Ilya. Mike goes on a bender; while he is unconscious, Harley receives a call telling her that Ilya is overdosing. She goes to him and revives him. Back together, the two take a bus bound for Florida, but Ilya leaves while Harley is sleeping. He finds shelter in an abandoned house, but sets himself alight by falling asleep with candles burning. Waking to find Ilya gone, a distraught Harley gets off the bus, makes her way back to the city and rejoins Mike.



Final frontiersmen: Eugene Cernan, Thomas Stafford, John Young

Reviewed by Michael Brooke

At the start of this affectionate documentary portrait, former astronaut Eugene A. ('Gene') Cernan describes himself as "the luckiest human being in the world", and given the evidence presented here, it's hard to disagree. Cernan is the 11th man to have set foot on the moon (just before his colleague Harrison 'Jack' Schmitt) and – to date – the last to depart; his impulsive scrawl of his daughter Tracy's initials in the lunar dust are presumably still visible for any subsequent visitors to discover.

As that anecdote suggests, this is as much a personal account as it is a potted history of the Gemini and Apollo space missions with which Cernan was closely involved. His first wife

Barbara has much to say about the pressures placed on the women left behind, who must hold the domestic fort while constantly worrying that what happened to Cernan's close colleagues Charles Bassett and Elliot See (killed in a February 1966 flying accident) or Virgil Grissom, Edward White and Roger Chaffee (killed in a cabin fire during a January 1967 pre-launch test) might happen to their own husbands. (Martha Chaffee recalls processing the news in front of the world's media.) It's little wonder that the astronaut divorce rate was reputedly 60 per cent, and that Cernan's own marriage contributed to that statistic.

A laconic, agreeably candid interviewee in the Clint Eastwood mould (in close-up, there's a distinct physical resemblance), who proves excellent company throughout the film's 96 minutes, Cernan acknowledges both this and his handful of professional failings – his inability to complete a 1966 spacewalking task still rattles, and he's visibly astonished that he was picked for the Apollo 17 lunar mission after he'd nearly drowned himself crashing his helicopter into Florida's Indian River. Meanwhile a barbecue-side chat features fellow US Navy pilot Fred 'Baldy' Baldwin teasing Cernan about early shortcomings when it came to bombing and landing at night. The film is constantly at pains to normalise Cernan, and this and his own evident disdain for excessively flowery language serve to emphasise the literally otherworldly eeriness of what he encountered ("It was the ultimate quiet moment in my life. Pure silence. Absolutely incredible").

Mark Craig's film, as bluntly no-nonsense as its subject, mixes new interview footage with archival material (happily, NASA was a stickler for recording its achievements for posterity), Cernan's 8mm home movies (with their grainy, faintly ghostly pallor) and a nifty sequence in silhouette animation about his initial recruitment and the peculiar demands of the astronaut training process. Now in his early eighties and aware of his own mortality – he read a eulogy at Neil Armstrong's 2012 memorial service – Cernan sits next to the Apollo 17 capsule (containing a dummy of himself) in the Johnson Space Center in Houston and wonders what people will make of it centuries hence. But, as the film repeatedly emphasises, the great merit of Cernan's achievement is that it couldn't be easier to grasp its essence: you only need to look up at that glowing, faintly pockmarked disc in the sky. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Gareth Dodds Patrick Mark Director of Photography Tim Cragg Film Editors David Fairhead Dan Haythorn Original Music Lorne Balfe Sound Design	Nick Adams Executive Producer Mark Stewart Productions Ltd Production Companies Mark Stewart Productions Stowatch Productions Co-executive producer: Geni	Capital Executive Producer Mark Stewart In Colour (L853)
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A documentary portrait of Eugene A. ('Gene') Cernan, the last man to set foot on the moon to date. Interviews with Cernan and with former colleagues and family members flesh out his life story and the history of the Mercury (1958-63), Gemini (1961-66) and Apollo (1961-72) space programmes. A US Navy pilot, Cernan was invited to join NASA's astronaut training programme in 1963, and was selected for the Gemini 9 back-up crew after the first crew were killed in an accident in February 1966. Later that year, Cernan performed a spacewalk, but, due to exhaustion, failed to complete all the tasks. After delays to the Apollo programme caused by the accidental deaths of astronauts Virgil Grissom, Edward White and Roger Chaffee (a close friend) on 27 January 1967, Cernan was selected for Apollo 10, a pathfinder mission launched on 18 May 1969. During re-entry, Cernan and his colleagues set a still unbroken speed record of 24,791 miles an hour. Later that year, Apollo 11 put men on the moon for the first time; however, after the near-disaster of Apollo 13, NASA's budget was scaled back. Following a flying accident, Cernan was convinced he would never go to the moon, but was assigned to Apollo 17, which launched on 7 December 1972. After he and geologist Harrison Schmitt performed various experiments on the moon's surface, Cernan was the last to leave, writing his daughter Tracy's initials in the lunar dust.

London Has Fallen

USA 2015

Director: Babak Najafi

Certificate 15 98m 53s

Reviewed by Henry K. Miller

It probably isn't a good sign that the poster for *London Has Fallen* needs to spell out that it is "the sequel to *Olympus Has Fallen*", the latter being the lesser of the two 2013 films in which the White House is overrun by bad guys (the other being *White House Down*). For those in need of a reminder, *Olympus* introduced the central duo of stupendously bland US president Asher (Aaron Eckhart) and his bodyguard Mike Banning (Gerard Butler), our sadistic torturer hero. This time around they have to fly to London to attend the British prime minister's state funeral, cueing a tense discussion about how to drive from Somerset House to St Paul's premised on the idea that the capital is crawling with maniacs equipped with the hardware to take out a presidential motorcade.

As it turns out, London is indeed crawling with armed maniacs: a substantial proportion, if not the majority, of police and guardsmen have been turned by Yemen-based Pakistani arms dealer Amir Barkawi (Alon Aboutboul), who is out for revenge after the death of his daughter in a drone strike. The film's most effective sequence is the build-up to the attack, as various world leaders are picked off in the hours before the ceremony: the German chancellor outside Buckingham Palace, the Italian prime minister (with his mistress) atop Westminster Abbey, etc. The effect is rather dissipated by the very cheap-looking CGI that is used to represent the fireworks when they come, starting with the Canadian premier's limo being blown up in Trafalgar Square, and the sequence turns downright comic when a paramedic begins firing a grenade launcher. But there is, fleetingly, a simple pleasure in seeing a deserted London from the air, even if the pretext is dubious terror-porn.

What follows is much less pleasurable.



Charing crossfire: Gerard Butler

as the focus shifts to Asher and Banning cat-and-mousing it through w1, offering countless baddies and exchanging lower-tier banter. Their relationship is close and quite physical, and at one point, when Asher emerges from a closet to save the day during a pitched battle in an M16 safe house, Banning delivers the line, "I always wondered when you were going to come out of the closet." The homophobic crack is in keeping with Banning's boorish character, and correspondingly lacking in self-awareness; but, weirdly, there is no sense that the writers are commenting on the bond between the president and his hard-bodied protector for the audience's benefit. *London Has Fallen* would be much more interesting and fun if Asher and Banning were allowed to follow the logic of their relationship in between knife-fights.

Overall, director Babak Najafi makes a marginally better fist of it than his predecessor on *Olympus*, Antoine Fuqua: allowing that the film is worthless, there is a fairly impressive long-take videogame-type sequence in which Banning fights his way up a Soho side street. Moreover, there is ever so slightly less of the torture and jingoistic kitsch that made up so much of the earlier instalment in the franchise. **B**

Louder than Bombs

Norway/France/Denmark/USA/Sweden 2015

Director: Joachim Trier

Certificate 15 109m 0s

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

It's a safe bet that the Norwegian director Joachim Trier, like many Scandinavians, speaks better English than most native speakers, so the language barrier can't have been what makes *Louder than Bombs* ever so slightly off. Trier's English-language debut, co-written with Eskil Vogt, has the advantage of a high-calibre international cast, with Isabelle Huppert, Gabriel Byrne and Jesse Eisenberg as the various members of the splintered Reed family; youngest son Conrad is played by Devin Druid, vaguely recognisable as the teenage Louie C.K. on the latter's FX television show. The use of the name Conrad suggests a possible homage to Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* (1980), but the final product lands somewhere between that decorous, undeniably moving family drama and Jason Reitman's startlingly misjudged entry in the way-we-live-now sweepstakes, *Men, Women & Children* (2014).

There is a sense, however, that Trier's sights were set somewhere closer to the vicinity of Resnais's *Muriel* (1963), for his narrative shuttles freely between present day and years past, paralleling (not altogether successfully) domestic trauma and, per Sontag, the suffering of others. Huppert appears only in flashback as mother Isabelle. An acclaimed war photographer, Isabelle died in a car accident two years ago, and things haven't been the same since. (*Louder than Bombs* appears less than two years after Norwegian director Erik Poppe's wholly extraneous *A Thousand Times Good Night*, in which Juliette Binoche played a combat photographer, which must constitute a mini-movement of some sort.) Isabelle is also present through the images she's left behind, a record of unimaginable pain and deprivation that provides a sharp contrast to the fairly routine middle-class problems of the surviving Reeds: father Gene (Byrne) can't get through to Conrad, who's also addicted to the war zone in the form of first-person shooter games, while eldest son Jonah (Eisenberg) whiles time away in petty infidelities, avoiding his duties as a new father. Taking after his mother in everything but courage, Jonah is drawn towards leading a double life, while Conrad is a figure almost absurd in his honesty: he hopes to introduce himself to his crush by gifting her with a diary of his innermost thoughts, like Levin from *Anna Karenina* as a high-school loner.

Isabelle takes her burden of terrible knowledge – suggested by Huppert with her customary inner fire – to the grave with her. Only David Strathairn, a fellow correspondent and occasional lover, remains to interpret her pain to the men who survive her. But for all of Trier and Vogt's narrative gymnastics, shifting perspective between the Reed men and even introducing fantasy and dream sequences, the movie is rarely on solid footing with basic details – it manages to fudge such disparate settings as a grad-school party, a disciplinary meeting in the principal's office and a late-night rendezvous between old lovers in a home packed for the movers. A scene in which Conrad is able to squire his half-drunk crush home in the early hours is notable for containing some of the tonal values missing elsewhere, given time and space to breathe in the scent

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Gerard Butler
Alan Siegel
Mark Gill
John Thompson
Matt O'Toole
Les Weldon
Screenplay
Creighton
Rothenberger
Katriin Benedikt
Christian Gudgesund
Chad St. John
Story
Creighton
Rothenberger
Katriin Benedikt
Based on characters
created by Creighton
Rothenberger.

Katriin Benedikt

Director of
Photography
Ed Wild
Editors
Paul Martin Smith
Michael Outine
Production Designer
Joel Collins
Music
Trevor Morris
Sound Mixer
Vladimir Kaloyanov
Costume Designer
Stephane Collie
Visual Effects
Worldwide FX
Peerless
Baseblack
Intelligent Creatures

UPP

Union
The Senate VFX
Painting Practice
Stunt Co-ordinator
Steve Griffin
©LHF Productions,
Inc.
Production
Companies
Millennium Films
presents a Millennium
Films, ©BASE
production
A film by Babak Najafi
Executive Producers
Avi Lerner
Trevor Short
Boaz Davidson

Christine Otai Crow
Heidi Jo Marlet
Ziggi Komasa
Guy Aeshalom
Cast
Gerard Butler
Agent Mike Banning
Aaron Eckhart
President
Benjamin Asher
Morgan Freeman
Vice President
Allan Funtball
Alon Aboutboul
Amir Barkawi
Angela Bassett
Lynne Jacobs
Service Director

Robert Foster

General Edward Clegg
Jackie Earle Haley
DC Mason
Melissa Leo
Ruth Macmillan,
Secretary of Defence
Radha Mitchell
Leah Banning
Sean O'Bryan
Ray Monroe,
Deputy Director
of the National
Security Agency
Wileed Zaalier
Kamran Barkawi
Charlotte Riley
Jacquelin Marshall,
MIS Agent
Colin Salmon

Chief Hazard

Bryan Linkin
SAS Lieutenant
Patrick Kennedy
John Lancaster, MIS
Intelligence Officer
Addi Bencherif
Raza Mansoor
Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]
Distributor
Lionsgate UK

Pakistan, the present. The daughter of arms dealer Amir Barkawi is killed in a US/UK drone strike.

Two years later, the British prime minister dies in mysterious circumstances. US president Benjamin Asher flies to London with his bodyguard Mike Banning to attend the state funeral at St Paul's. In an attack coordinated by Barkawi from Yemen, the leaders of France, Germany, Italy, Japan and Canada are all assassinated by rogue British police, soldiers and emergency workers; Westminster Abbey and other landmarks are destroyed in the process. Asher and Banning narrowly escape by helicopter, but are shot down near St James's Park. Barkawi's team in London cut the capital's power and block

its communications with the outside world.

From the White House, vice-president Turnbull mobilises US forces and liaises with the British command centre at Scotland Yard. At an M16 safe house, Asher and Banning meet agent Jacquelin Marshall, who sets out to uncover the principal mole in the British security apparatus. Asher and Banning attempt to reach the US embassy, but Asher is taken prisoner. With an SAS squad, Banning goes to the terrorists' base in Soho, where Asher is about to be beheaded. Banning rescues him just in time. Marshall confronts the head of MIS and kills him when he refuses to surrender. Barkawi is killed in a US drone strike. Banning celebrates the birth of his daughter, but decides not to resign.

of a northeastern suburb at the moment of dusk – and containing a note of poetic perversity. It is perhaps part of Trier's plan that the faraway world that scarred Isabelle in body and mind should remain something of an abstraction; but leaving the home front just as hazily recalled can only be counted as a failure of conception. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Thomas Robsahm
Joshua Astrachan
Albert Berger
Ron Versa
Marc Turtletaub
Alexandre
Mallet-Guy
Written by
Eskil Vogt
Joachim Trier
Director of Photography
Jakob Thrun
Editor
Oliver Bague-Couté
Production Designer
Molly Hughes
Composer
Gus Feltman
Costume Designer
Gisle Teitel
Emma Petter

Film & TV Fund,
Aide aux cinémas
du monde, Centre
national du cinéma
et de l'image
animée, Ministère
des Affaires
étrangères et du
Développement
International,
Institut Français,
Danish Film Institute
with the participation
of Canal+, Arte
France, Cine+
Financed with
support from The
Norwegian Film
Institute, Eurimages,
Nordic Film & TV
Fund, The Danish
Film Institute, Centre
national du cinéma
et de l'image animée,
Institut Français,
Canal+, Arte France,
Cine+, NRK, CMore,
DR, Memento
Films Distribution,
Memento Films
International, SF,
Trio, Storyline
Produced by Molyto
Co-produced by Molyto
Memento Films
Production, Nimbus
Film production
in association with
Animal Kingdom,
Beachside Films,
Memento Films
Distribution,
Memento Films
International, Bona
Fide Productions,
in co-production with
Arte France Cinéma,
Don't Look Now
with support from
Nordic Film Institute,
Eurimages - Council
of Europe, Nordisk

Cast
Gabriel Byrne
Gene Reed
Jesse Eisenberg
Jonah Reed
Isabelle Huppert
Isabelle Joubert
Reed
Devlin Druil
Conrad Reed
Rachel Brosnahan
Erin
Ruby Jerins
Hélène
Megan Ketch
Amy Reed
David Strathairn
Richard Weissman
Amy Ryan
Hannah Brennan
In Colour & Black
[L&S]
Distributor
Soda Pictures

©Molyto, Memento
Films Production,
Nimbus Film, Arte
France Cinéma
Production Companies
Molyto and Memento
Films present a
Molyto Productions,
Memento Films
Production, Nimbus
Film production
in association with
Animal Kingdom,
Beachside Films,
Memento Films
Distribution,
Memento Films
International, Bona
Fide Productions,
in co-production with
Arte France Cinéma,
Don't Look Now
with support from
Nordic Film Institute,
Eurimages - Council
of Europe, Nordisk

New York State, the present. Jonah Reed, a new father with a new profession, encounters an ex-girlfriend in the hospital corridors while fetching food for his exhausted wife. Jonah's father Gene lives in a small town with Jonah's teenage brother Conrad. Jonah and Conrad's mother Isabelle was a renowned war photographer who died in a car collision two years ago. Richard, a former colleague of Isabelle's who's been commissioned to write a piece about her for the 'New York Times', announces his intention to reveal that her death was a suicide. Jonah comes home to sort through his mother's affairs, and discovers that she was having an affair. Conrad, who has been sheltered from the information that his mother ended her own life, silently pines for a classmate, and records his thoughts in a journal; he announces that he's going to show his journal to the girl in question. Jonah advises against this. Shortly afterwards, Jonah meets up with an old flame who lives nearby. Gene discovers that Isabelle and Richard were lovers. When Richard's article appears, Conrad takes a chance with his crush at a party. Conrad and his father reconcile, and together drive the troubled, heavy-drinking Jonah back to his wife and baby.

The Man Who Knew Infinity

USA/Singapore/United Kingdom 2015

Director: Matthew Brown

Certificate 12A 108m 36s

Reviewed by Matthew Taylor

"It was the most romantic incident in my life," reflects Cambridge don G.H. Hardy (Jeremy Irons) wistfully during the flashback that opens Matthew Brown's conversely stolid biopic. He's referring to his unlikely friendship and collaboration with Srinivasa Ramanujan, the Indian mathematics wunderkind who arrived at Trinity College in 1913, battled institutional prejudice to publish his innovative research into number theory and left garlanded as a Fellow of the Royal Society. An autodidact versed in advanced mathematics by the age of 12, Ramanujan's solitary, trailblazing studies proved too ahead of their time for both the Madras education system and, initially, the condescending rigidity of Cambridge.

Drawn from Robert Kanigel's book, Brown's script revolves around a science/faith opposition: the relationship between the devoutly religious Ramanujan, who sees the face of God in every conjured equation, and Hardy, an introverted atheist for whom hard proof is essential. The resulting film seems more in tune with the methodical wavelength of Hardy than his visionary protégé – as in recent prestige biopics *The Imitation Game* and *The Theory of Everything*, a dizzyingly complex mind is given a well-mounted but rather workaday screen treatment.

Ramanujan is played by Dev Patel, who adopts a wide-eyed, rabbit-in-the-headlights stare throughout, which adequately conveys the man's almost fanatical zeal in pursuing his theories. All the same, it's a somewhat one-note performance that keeps the real Ramanujan at a distance. Irons impresses more as the staid, emotionally shackled Hardy, avoiding eye contact wherever possible, he recalls the Oliver Sacks depicted in 1990's *Awakenings* when he admits he's "never been very good at this sort of thing" (ie human relationships).

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Edward R. Pressman
Jim Young
Joe Thomas
Matthew Brown
Sofia Soderkvist
Jon Katz
Written by
Matthew Brown
Based on the book
by Robert Kanigel
Director of Photography
Larry Smith
Editor
JC Bond
Production Designer
Luciana Arrighi
Music
Coby Brown

Production
Samuel Mizer
Ian Voigt
Costume Designer
Ann Maskrey
©Infinity
Commissioning and
Distribution, LLC
Production Companies
An Edward R.
Pressman/Animus
Films production
in association with
Cayenne Pepper
Productions, Antegist
Entertainment Group,
Mancy Holdings
A film by Matthew

Brown
Produced in
association with
Kree Films
Supported by a film
grant from the Alfred
P Sloan Foundation's
programme in Public
Understanding of
Science & Technology
Supported by the TFI
Sloan Filmmaker Fund
Made with the
support of Film
Independent
Filmmaker Project
Executive Producers
Swati Bhishe
Joseph N. Cohen

Cast
Dev Patel
Srinivasa Ramanujan
Iyengar
Jeremy Irons
Godfrey Harold
Hardy, G.H.

Devika Bhishe
Janaki
Kevin R. McNally
Major Percy Alexander
MacMahon
Jeremy Northam
Bertrand Russell
Anthony Call
Hewell
Shazad Latif
Chandra Mahalanobis
Arundhati Nag
Komalatammal
Richard Johnson
Vice Master
Henry Jackson
Raghuvir Joshi
Narasimha
Dhritiman Chatterji
Narasimha Iyer

Pedraic Delaney
Begun
Roger Narayan
scribe
Stephen Fry
Sir Francis Spring
Toby Jones
John Edensor
Littledown
In Colour
[2.35:1]
Distributor
Warner Bros. Pictures
International (UK)

India, 1913. Shipping clerk Srinivasa Ramanujan sends a letter to G.H. Hardy, a mathematics professor at Cambridge's Trinity College, detailing his research into number theory. Hardy recognises Ramanujan's visionary talent and, despite the scepticism of his colleagues, invites Ramanujan to Cambridge to pursue his research. The two men forge a firm friendship, though Ramanujan's undisciplined approach, inspired by his religious beliefs, clashes with the atheistic, Hardy's methodical nature. Ramanujan's mother confiscates his wife Janaki's letters to him, leading

This odd couple are brought together after Ramanujan, while working as a shipping clerk in Madras, writes an imploring letter to Hardy, detailing his extensive hypotheses. Immediately recognising a prodigious talent, Hardy invites the young seeker to Cambridge – which entails separating him from his beloved bride Janaki (Devika Bhishe). Perhaps to counter the grey, conspicuously mauld milieu of Trinity, the film makes a mauld meal of this situation. Melodrama is artificially injected via the confiscation by Ramanujan's mother of Janaki's letters to her husband, which leads both Janaki and Ramanujan to feel forsaken by the other. Bhishe has to be particularly thankless task here, being mainly required to mope around in brief insets between the main action in Cambridge.

At Trinity, Ramanujan constantly finds his wings clipped by Hardy, who stresses the importance of stone-cold evidence over flighty speculation. But the amount of compelling drama that can be generated from this clash of approaches turns out to be finite, with the film locking into an increasingly repetitive groove – Ramanujan excitedly announcing a theory, only to be shushed by Hardy. Traditionally, films about maths geniuses both real and fictional have incorporated a pivotal element of personal struggle or affliction: John Nash's paranoid schizophrenia in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), buried childhood trauma in *Good Will Hunting* (1997), autism in *X+Y* (2014). *The Man Who Knew Infinity* is no exception, with Ramanujan not only facing racism and scorn from his peers (at one point during wartime he is roughed up by soldiers for being both a foreigner and a non-fighter) but also succumbing to a bout of tuberculosis that nearly kills him. But none of this can make up for the essentially inert nature of proceedings. Ramanujan may well have known infinity; *The Man Who Knew Infinity* has more limited ambitions. **B**

Janaki to believe that he has forsaken her. After much persistence, Ramanujan has his first collection of theorems published by Trinity. Ramanujan is sent into a deep depression when he finally receives a letter from Janaki – it states that she will be leaving their village. Because of wartime rationing, the vegetarian Ramanujan suffers from malnutrition and narrowly survives a bout of tuberculosis. While he is hospitalised, Hardy lobbies Trinity to make him a Fellow of the Royal Society.

In 1913, Ramanujan returns to India and is reunited with Janaki. He dies a year later when his illness returns.

Mapplethorpe Look at the Pictures

USA 2016
Directors: Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato
Certificate 18 108m 26s



Fearless: Robert Mapplethorpe

Reviewed by Lisa Mullen

The subtitle of Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's perceptive portrait of the controversial photographer comes from footage of an outraged senator denouncing a 1989 exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, which included some of his infamous images of erect penises and anal penetration. The irony is that those who tried to declare Mapplethorpe's work unfit to be seen could only justify their call for censorship by encouraging people to examine the images closely. It's a paradox that Bailey and Barbato exploit cleverly: unlike the philistine afraid of his own guilty compulsion to look, we the audience are invited to see

the photographs for the art that they are.

Yet Bailey and Barbato are less interested, in the end, in debates about obscenity than in questioning what it was that made Mapplethorpe so fearlessly confrontational in the first place. Telling his story through a series of frank interviews with those who knew and worked with him, they capture the moment in the late 1960s and 1970s when the social gains made by gay rights coincided with the reluctant acceptance in the art world of the medium of photography. As the film tells it, Mapplethorpe's work fused both struggles, insisting on an uncompromising and distinctive aesthetic of male homosexuality, and on the ability of the camera to capture it.

There are plenty of hair-raising tales to tell along the way, and Bailey and Barbato keep their own camera gazing mercilessly at their interviewees until every bean has been spilled, often choosing to include the awkward coughs, pauses and digressions that – the film slyly suggests – speak volumes about the real feelings of the interview. There are the lovers who remember his insatiable appetites and his emotional coldness; the critics who still wince at the memory of crossing him; the younger brother, Edward, also a photographer, who can't hide his bitterness about Robert's resentment of his parallel career. No one questions the quality of the work, which is celebrated in the film with a reverent attention to detail that encompasses the early and lesser-known pieces as much as the iconic ones; but the perfection of the photographs was clearly achieved with considerable collateral damage to anyone who got in the way of Mapplethorpe's ferocious ambition.

Patti Smith (his lover before he came out) clearly had a huge influence, and is notable by her absence from the film, but Mapplethorpe really owed his early success to the financial support of the wealthy curator Sam Wagstaff, who bought him a loft apartment and introduced him to influential collectors. "You either had money, or you were famous, or you were sex," says one ex-boyfriend of Mapplethorpe's ever-changing roster of lovers, models and patrons. Mapplethorpe's promiscuity seemed to be so closely bound up with his practice that it's impossible to conceive of the art without the sex. He pursued both with relentless focus, and finally succeeded, as the film persuasively argues, in inventing a new way of looking at them. ●

Mojave

USA 2014
Director: William Monahan
Certificate 15 92m 50s

Reviewed by Violet Lucca

Channelling a very specific, moody variety of existential masculine crisis, William Monahan's *Mojave* treads a line between unwitting and knowing self-parody. Thomas (Garrett Hedlund), a Hollywood player who's been famous since he was 19, is now so wounded (presumably by nothing and everything) that he can barely function, let alone finish post-production on his latest film. He decamps to the desert with only a few bottles of booze and wanders around until he encounters Jack (Oscar Isaac), a mysterious, vaguely threatening drifter who, along with referencing Melville and Shakespeare, has a Hulk Hogan-esque penchant for punctuating his sentences with the word 'brother'. ("Desert's no place to get cut, brother"). During their initial tussle by campfire light, Thomas steals Jack's shotgun, a transgression that Jack then attempts to avenge by tormenting Thomas and his Hollywood Hills inner circle, including girlfriend Milly (Louise Bourgoin) and business partner Norman (Mark Wahlberg).

This cat-and-mouse game would likely feel more rewarding were there something more to Thomas than his gravelly voiced ennui, *de rigueur* infidelity, bad philosophy and strong chin. We never find out what the film he's making is about (or even what his role in it is), and instead only see him barking at his sycophantic deer-in-the-headlights assistants. Likewise, Jack happens to be one of those supernaturally gifted stalkers who can effortlessly invade any home, and who possesses unparalleled fighting skills, which diminishes any sense of surprise; rather than being creepy, his ability to suddenly pop up behind Thomas becomes thunderingly predictable, like something from a badly scripted horror film.

The only character of interest here is Wahlberg's blustering, Boston-born Norman, who exists solely for comic relief (and delivers it in spades), yet gets roughly five minutes of screen time before being offed by Jack. (He goes out in style, post-*ménage* with two prostitutes, wearing a bathrobe and Uggs boots while Mulatu Astatke's manic 'I Faram Gami I Faram' blares on the soundtrack.) His brief yet contrapuntal presence imparts a certain level of Lynchian humour – and indeed the set-up apes certain aspects of 1997's *Lost Highway* (very bad man follows protagonist) and 2001's *Mulholland Dr.* (ridiculous industry denizens). But, like most Lynch imitators, *Mojave* doesn't really put these elements together in a compelling or uniquely strange way.

All of Jack's torments, and Norman's consternation with the moneymen interfering with Thomas's project, seem to be intended as a commentary on fame and the industry but, like the typewriters and landline phones that decorate Thomas's various mansions, come off instead as indiscriminate and out of date. (The art direction is both perplexing and wonderful: Jack's wood-lined trailer in the desert, full of cosy clutter, has a typewriter and a reel-to-reel tape machine, on which he's recorded a folk song narrating his sad life.)

There are moments when Monahan explicitly makes you question whether or

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Fenton Bailey Randy Barbato Katharina Otto-Bernstein Mora Card Directors of Photography Hay Tsong Mario Panagiotopoulos Edited by Langston F Page Art Director James McGowan Original Music	David Benjamin Steinberg Audio Jim Moncur Tyman Strahm ©Home Box Office, Inc. Film Manufacturers, Inc. Production Companies Film Manufacturers Inc presents in association with HBO Documentary Films a World of	Wonder production A film by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato Executive Producer Sheila Nevins In Colour [1.78:1] Distributor Dogwoof
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A documentary examining the life and work of the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) through interviews with friends, lovers, employees and art-world insiders. The film is bookended by an account of the controversy caused by Mapplethorpe's posthumous exhibition 'The Perfect Moment'. During Mapplethorpe's conventional suburban childhood he showed flashes of rebellion, but it was his decision to study art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn that determined the course of his life. There, he was influenced by his girlfriend Patti Smith, but later came out as gay. He began to experiment with collages made of images from porn magazines, and eventually this led to him taking his own photographs of the naked male body, which developed into an interest in BDSM culture. He was fiercely ambitious, and his relationship with the wealthy curator Sam Wagstaff gave him the financial freedom to set up a studio and work obsessively. At the peak of his fame, the rich and famous wanted to be photographed by him, and he gained recognition for the beauty and precision of his monochrome nudes. He died of AIDS at the age of 42, endowing a foundation which continues to promote his art and fund HIV research.



Jack it all in: Oscar Isaac

not all of this is really happening, such as when, during an exchange at a restaurant, Thomas angrily tells Jack, "I don't even know you exist." Still, these moments never fully establish a sense of ambiguity (there's certainly nothing notable going on visually). Is this merely the dream of a superficial man who, despite being exceedingly boring, still feels pain if you cut him? Jack's nattering theories about the human condition could be transcripts of any old self-assured weirdo you might encounter – and are about as interesting to watch. **C**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

William Green
William Morahan
Justin Suzanne
Jones

Written by

Aaron L. Ginsburg

Director of

Photography

Don Davis

Editor

John David Allen

Production

Designer

Robb Buono

Music

Andrew Hewitt

Sound Mixer

Agamemnon

Andreas

Costume Designer

Aniele Antone

Executive Producers

William Morahan

Production Companies

Atlas Independent

presenters in association

with Hencforth

Pictures, Relativity

International, MCA

Entertainment, LLC

an Atlas Independent

production

A William

Morahan film

Executive

Producers

Dale Armin Johnson

Glen P. Murray

Julie B. May

Mike Illich Jr.

Lewis P. Horowitz

Cast

Oscar Isaac

Jack

Garret Hedlund

Thomas, Tom

Louise Bourgoin

Milly

Walton Goggins

Jim

Mark Wahlberg

Norman

Dolby Digital

[2-351]

Distributor

Signature

Entertainment

Motley's Law

Denmark/USA/Norway/Finland/Sweden/The Netherlands 2015

Director: Nicole N. Horanyi

Reviewed by Lisa Mullen

It takes a special sort ofchutzpah to leave Milwaukee and go, all alone, to Kabul to set up a legal practice, so it's not surprising to find that Kimberley Motley, who did just that in 2008, is an unusually courageous and assertive individual. We first see her getting off a plane at the airport in Afghanistan and chiding her driver for parking in the wrong place; later she ticks off her assistant, Khalil, for being nervous about the fact that someone lobbed a grenade into her house a few days before. Since Khalil and his family also live there, you might suppose he had a right to be a little anxious, but Kim is having none of it. She won't be intimidated. She has seen it all before.

It's difficult to tell from Nicole N. Horanyi's documentary portrait of this formidable woman how much of her diamond-hardness is real, and how much a necessary survival strategy. The camera remains a passive observer as Kim throws herself into her work, appearing at hearings, visiting prisons and slicing through red tape. She stops only in the evenings, when she spends lonely hours looking at pictures of her three kids, or conducting slightly stilted Skype conversations with her husband. She has no visible social life. Her ties back home in Wisconsin pull her back to the US for regular visits, and Horanyi follows her there too, to observe her going out trick-or-treating, or playing soccer with her daughter. Yet in neither location are we sure that we're seeing the real Kim or getting close to understanding what motivates her strangely embattled and disconnected life.

When asked outright why she works in Kabul, Motley explains that she's there for the money. Even though she takes on many pro bono cases for abused or falsely accused women and children, the work she does for unlucky expats who have become entangled in the corrupt and broken Afghan legal system still earns her more than she could ever bank back home. As the only foreign attorney licensed to work in Afghanistan, she knows how to get things done; even when the local judges and prosecutors throw every possible impediment at her, she can quote secular and Sharia law back at them until they're



To boldly go: Kimberley Motley

helplessly hamstrung. Her refusal to conform to local norms – she doesn't wear a headscarf, offer bribes or speak Pashtun – makes her both an exotic novelty and a threat to the status quo. Hence the escalating death threats, the hand grenades and the understandably jumpy staff.

Although Horanyi doesn't interview her formally, we see Motley talking to US journalists who want to do stories and glamorous photoshoots with this former beauty queen turned superlawyer. Still, the film frustrates through its lack of intimacy. Though it paints an alarming picture of the breakdown of law and order in the former war zone on the eve of the 2014 withdrawal of US troops, Motley herself remains a charismatic enigma: impertinent speculation simply bounces off her dark glasses and well-rehearsed persona. There's a fascinating story here somewhere, but we never quite find out what it is. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Producer

Helle Faber

Idea & Research

Jorgen Jacob Jensen

Director of

Photography

Henrik Bohn Ipsen

Film Editors

Nicola Monberg

Sten Johannessen

Sound Designers

Kristian Solén

Eldenes Andersen

Brian Dyrby

Production

Companies

Made in Copenhagen

presents a film by

Nicole N. Horanyi

Fiscal sponsor in

the US: Women

Made Movies

Produced with the

support of Danish

Film Institute

in co-operation with

DR2 Dokumentar

Danida, Media State

Fund & TV Broadcast

Programmes of the

European Union,

Nordisk Film & TV

Fond, Cinereach,

Gucco Tribeca

Documentary Fund,

YLE, SVT and VPRO

In Colour

[1.85:1]

Subtitles

Distributor

Dothouse

Los Angeles, the present. Actor-writer Thomas wakes up and listens to answering-machine messages from his agent and estranged wife. He goes to a gas station, buys two bottles of vodka, a six-pack of beer and a large quantity of drinking water, then drives out to the Mojave Desert. After overturning his jeep, he walks around for a day or so. At night, he sees a man, Jack, standing on a rock. Jack joins him at his camp, his manner shifting between philosophizing and making threats. Thomas takes Jack's shotgun and chases him away. Jack sees Thomas accidentally shoot a police officer. Thomas heads back to Los Angeles and Jack follows. Jack is picked up by a wealthy gay man, whom he kills before installing himself in the man's mansion. Jack stalks Thomas and his girlfriend, and kills Thomas's business partner Norman. Jack plants evidence of Norman's murder in Thomas's house, and demands that he and Thomas settle things in the desert. Thomas shoots and kills him. He burns Jack's trailer and returns home, where his daughter is waiting.

A documentary following US attorney Kimberley Motley, who is the only foreign lawyer with a licence to work in Afghanistan. Dividing her time between Kabul and Milwaukee, where her husband and three children live, she takes on pro bono cases defending abused Afghan women and children. She funds this work by acting for foreigners who have fallen foul of Afghanistan's labyrinthine legal system.

The film depicts her struggle to free a South African who was convicted of drug trafficking and has served his sentence but is still not being released because he refuses to pay a bribe. She also visits a women's prison and a young offenders'

institution; she frequently comes up against resistance and corruption, which hampers her work.

Her visits home provide an oasis of normality, although when her husband is shot in his car in a random attack, she jokes that Wisconsin is no safer than Kabul. However, attacks on her Afghan home become more frequent and severe, and her assistant Khalil and his family move out. Motley takes refuge in a well-guarded hotel; when the hotel is attacked by marauding gunmen, she escapes harm by hiding from them, but is severely shaken. Doubtful about whether she can continue to work in Afghanistan, she begins to look for other troubled places where she can expand her business.

Nasty Baby

USA/Chile/France 2015
Director: Sebastián Silva
Certificate 15 101m 2s

Reviewed by Anton Bitel

'You're always crossing boundaries. People have boundaries.'

These words are addressed to the chief antagonist of *Nasty Baby*, a noisy, belligerent, grope-happy homophobe known as 'the Bishop' (Reg E. Cathey), who keeps invading the personal space of his more genteel, hipster neighbours. But if this mentally challenged giant is essentially a demanding, annoying man-child, there are other adult babies in his Brooklyn 'hood who might equally lay claim to the film's title.

Nasty Baby is also the name of an art project that Freddy, played by writer-director Sebastián Silva (*The Maid, Magic Magic*), is seen pitching to a gallery owner in the opening scene. Planning to make a baby with his boyfriend Mo (Tunde Adebimpe) and their friend Polly (Kristen Wiig), Freddy explores his conflicted feelings about parenthood by filming himself grotesquely mimicking a big baby. As he invites more and more of his friends and colleagues to play at being infants before the camera, his video art becomes a reflex for Silva's own filmmaking, which similarly enables us to observe this community at its most irresponsible and impulsive. The Bishop may circle the lives of Freddy and his friends as a constant irritant, even a genuine threat, but as he tests their limits they too are found wanting. One of Freddy's friends blithely sidesteps the Bishop with his car, oblivious to the impact. Freddy himself, prone to outbursts of anger, stalks the Bishop back to his home address, and later, as part of a childish prank, leads a raiding party to throw a stink bomb into his apartment (with consequences that even he admits are "kind of not that funny"). The violence that Freddy will eventually enact against the Bishop may be partly in self-defence, but Freddy's capacity for destructive rage is there from the start.

Silva may, like the character he's playing, be a gay Brooklynite working in the audiovisual arts, but despite an opening textual claim that



Crossing the line: Kristen Wiig

it's "based on a true story", the central plot of *Nasty Baby* (Polly's troubled impregnation, the feud with the Bishop) is pure fiction. As with Silva's *Crystal Fairy & the Magical Cactus* (2013), the cast improvised their dialogue from a loose outline, and the result is a free-wheeling, slightly meandering hangout movie in which boundaries are not just crossed but repeatedly redrawn. Where Freddy and Mo's mixed-race gay marriage and attempts to have a baby with Polly are viewed from the inside as entirely normal, Silva occasionally introduces the tension of outside perspectives (such as those of the Bishop and Mo's sister), which see only transgression in the trio's conduct. Similarly, while we are invited to keep company with this threesome and their friends for the film's duration, our sympathies become compromised both by what they do and how quick they are to bury any moral accountability. Over the final credits, Freddy and Polly roller-disco away, unbounded and carefree like little, not quite innocent children – with the repeated lyric "let me think about it" urging the reflection that they lack.

Our Little Sister

Japan 2015
Director: Koreeda Hirokazu
Certificate PG 127m 9s

Reviewed by Jasper Sharp

Koreeda Hirokazu's portraits of contemporary Japanese family set-ups (albeit unorthodox ones) have drawn misleading if perhaps inevitable critical comparison with the home dramas of Ozu Yasujiro. The director has firmly rejected such comparisons, citing instead Mike Leigh as a somewhat unlikely kindred spirit. Still, while parallels with the bile and bite of Leigh's peculiarly British brand of exasperation and the clenched-teeth pressure-cooker environment of the family reunion portrayed in *Still Walking* (2008) are easy to detect, it is nonetheless the shadow of Ozu that looms largest in Hirokazu's latest work.

The setting for this superficially slight tale about the three young women of the Koda family who take into their home their 14-year-old half-sister Suzu, whom they first meet at their estranged father's funeral, is Kamakura, the ancient capital that Ozu made his home from 1952 until his death in 1963, and where many of his finest post-war films were realised. The story unfolds at an unburied pace, without overt conflict or sweeping narrative arcs, against the backdrop of the changing seasons of cherry blossoms and summer rains; low camera angles abound in the interiors of the sisters' traditional wooden home.

Seemingly inconsequential scenes of Bechdel-friendly sisterly solidarity initially invite readings that the film is little more than a quaint celebration of old-school family values. Any domestic discord seems to be restricted to bickering as to who gets to use the bathtub first, or the disapproval of the emotionally guarded eldest sibling Sachi towards her less reserved sister Yoshino's drinking and reckless romantic dalliances. Suzu eases into her new life with few problems, adapting to her younger sister role over shared meals of homemade pickles or the mackerel served at the café that is the social focus of this coastal idyll town.

However, the emotional memories evoked by such local produce take on a bittersweet taste, as subtle nuances within the dynamics of this ad hoc domestic unit emerge, shifting assumptions about the family's backstory prior to Suzu's effective adoption. When Yoshino and Chika get their little sister drunk on the final remaining batch of *umeshu* plum wine made by their grandmother before her passing, the plums harvested from the tree planted in the garden some 55 years ago to mark the birth of their mother, it delicately draws attention to Suzu's outsider status within the maternal lineage. She has no blood ties to the family home, which on paper still belongs to the mother who, in the emotional aftermath of the breakup of her marriage some 15 years previously, left her daughters in the care of their grandmother and has remained largely missing from the picture ever since. Suzu later confides to Futa, her soulmate on her school's mixed soccer team, about her sense of awkwardness in sharing with her half-sisters' memories of the father who abandoned them for her own mother when Sachi was the age she is now: her birth effectively came at the cost of their stable home life. When at one point she is offered the local speciality of whitebait on rice,

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Juan De Dios Larrain
Pablo Larrain
Producers
Charlie Dibe
David Hecojua
Julia Oh
Written by
Sebastián Silva
Cinematography
Sergio Armstrong
Editor
Sofia Subercaseaux
Production Design
Nico Arce
Music
Danny Beni
Saunders Jaramas
Sound Mixers
Kevin Kiriwaki
Eric Branting
Costume Design
Mark Gratton
©Fabula
Productions, Inc.
Production Companies
Fabula, Funny
Balloons, Versatile
in association

with Director
Executive Producers
Peter Danner
Pape Boye
Viviane Pichon
Sebastián Silva
Christine Vachon
Cast
Tunde Adebimpe
Mo
Reg E. Cathey
'The Bishop'
Mark Margolis
Richard
Ala Shawkat
Wendy
Agustín Silva
Chino
Sebastián Silva
Freddy
Kristen Wiig
Polly
Anthony Chisolm
Mo's father
Neal Huff
gallery owner
Lillias White
Ceclia

In Colour
[LBS]
Distributor
Network Releasing

Brooklyn, New York, present day. Freddy, an artist who has been attempting to artificially inseminate his best friend Polly, works through his conflicted feelings about parenthood with a video entitled 'Nasty Baby'. Freddy proves infertile, so he and Polly turn to Freddy's live-in boyfriend Mo. While the three are visiting his family, Mo overcomes his initial reluctance and agrees to be the sperm donor. Meanwhile tensions escalate between the three friends and a mentally unstable, homophobic neighbour who calls himself 'the Bishop'. After the Bishop manhandles Polly in the street, Freddy and his friends throw a stink bomb into the Bishop's basement flat, in a prank that gets out of hand. Freddy's completed video is badly received by a gallery owner. In another prank gone wrong, Mo and Polly trick Freddy into believing that Polly's impregnation by Mo has failed. Downcast on his way home, Freddy is assaulted by the Bishop, and retaliates by hitting him with a six-pack of beer. When the Bishop tries to knife him, Freddy stabs him in the throat. After Polly and Mo return, a distraught Freddy suffocates the Bishop. Helped by Freddy's younger brother Chino and their older gay neighbour Richard, they burn and bury the Bishop's body and clean up all the evidence. Freddy, Mo and the pregnant Polly walk in the neighbourhood, stopping to admire a friend's baby.



Relative merits: Ayase Haruka, Nagasawa Masami, Hirose Suzu, Kaho

she is too ashamed to admit that their father regularly cooked the same dish for her when she was growing up, a tradition carried over from his former hometown.

Sachi has her own pangs of conscience. Her decision to accept a job in the terminal-care ward at the hospital where she works is, it's hinted, motivated by the filial guilt that it was Suzu who nursed their father through his final months of cancer. The absence of a father figure throughout her teenage years similarly appears to inform her clandestine affair with a doctor colleague, the exact nature of which becomes clearer as the film progresses. Yoshino too is looking for an emotional anchor. Chika, the former baby of the family before Suzu's discovery, seems the most balanced of the three, although consequently can't help but feel a little underwritten.

Adapted from Akimi Yoshida's manga *Uminachi Diary* ('Seaside Town Diary'), *Our Little*

Sister explores concerns similar to those found in much of Koreeda's work: the investigation into repressed, misplaced or shared memories of *After Life* (1998); the motifs of absent parents and restructuring families of *Maborosi* (1995), *Nobody Knows* (2004) and *Like Father, Like Son* (2013). Adhering to the lighter, more conventional approach the director has settled into since his paean to childhood innocence *I Wish* (2011), the understated drama of his latest film might appear to lack the stylistic individualism and immediacy of the earlier works that established his international reputation. Nevertheless, Koreeda's effortless ability subtly to accumulate layer upon layer of emotional detail through successive scenes of everyday life substantiates his status as the most probing and consistently interesting observer of Japanese family relationships of his generation. In this respect at least, comparisons to Ozu seem apt. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Producers Matsuzaki Kaoru Taguchi Hiroyuki	Music Kanno Yoko	Production Companies Production committee: Fuji Television Network, Shogakukan, Toho, Gaga	Chief Executive Producers Ishihara Takashi Ichikawa Minami Tom Yoda	Koda Sachi Nagasawa Masami Koda Yoshino Kaho Koda Chika Hirose Suzu Asano Suzu Kase Ryo Sakashita Maeda Ohshiroh Futa Fubuki Jun Ms Ninomiya Otake Shinobu Miyako	Suzu Ryohel Ikeda Takafumi Sakaguchi Kentaro Kimura Midoriko
Written by Koreeda Hirokazu Based on the original graphic novel Uminachi Diary by Akimi Yoshida	Production Sound/Re-recording Mixer Tsurumaki Yutaka Costume Designer Ito Saeo	Production by FILM (Fuji IG Laboratory for Movies) Presented by Fuji Television Network, Inc., Shogakukan, Inc., Toho Co., Ltd., Gaga Corporation	Executive Producers Ogura Yasushi Omura Makoto Ueda Tachii Osaka Satoru	In Colour [1.85:1] Subtitles	Distributor Curzon Artificial Eye
Director of Photography Takimoto Mikeya	Edited by Koreeda Hirokazu Production Designer	Cast Ayase Haruka			

Kamakura, Japan, present day, *Sisters* Sachi, Yoshino and Chika live together in the family home where they were raised by their maternal grandmother after their father left for another woman some 15 years previously and their mother departed shortly afterwards. Since their grandmother's death, Sachi has assumed the role of head of the household. Learning of their estranged father's death, the sisters travel to Yamagata for his funeral and meet Suzu, the 14-year-old daughter from his second marriage. Sachi impetuously invites their newly discovered half-sister to live with them.

Suzu moves in with the three sisters and starts at the local school, joining the soccer team and proving instantly popular. The sisters' great aunt visits Sachi and berates her for taking Suzu in without asking permission from their mother Miyako, now living in

Hokkaido. Yoshino, who works at a local bank, gets drunk after breaking up with her boyfriend, and squabbles with Sachi. Sachi, who is conducting a secret affair with a doctor at the hospital where she works, is promoted to the terminal-care ward; Yoshino is also promoted at the bank. Yoshino discovers Ms Ninomiya, the owner of the small seafood restaurant that serves as the hub of the local community, might be forced to sell up due to debt. Sachi learns that Ms Ninomiya has cancer. Miyako returns for her mother's memorial service, having not communicated with her daughters for many years. She provokes an argument with Sachi by suggesting that they sell the family home. They resolve their differences and Miyako returns to Hokkaido. Ms Ninomiya dies, and the sisters gather with the local community for her funeral.

The Passing

United Kingdom 2015
Director: Gareth Bryn

Reviewed by Anton Bitel

Welsh-language feature *The Passing* opens with Stanley (Mark Lewis Jones) literally down a hole. He is deep in the well he's building by hand, shovelling mud into an old bucket that he then painstakingly hoists up into the rainy, wintry farmstead above. Stanley cuts an isolated figure – a lonesome Sisyphus, struggling against the elements in a labour that might well take longer than a lifetime to complete. Even when he's back indoors, he spends much of his time in a workshop running a plane to and fro over some wood while listening to a broken record. Here amid the dust, mildew and cobwebs of the dilapidated farmhouse, everything seems a vivid metaphor for stasis and decay.

That dust is stirred by the sudden arrival of Sara (Annes Elwy) and Iwan (Dyfan Dwyfor), whose car has crashed into a nearby stream. Unlike Stanley, this fugitive couple are just passing through. Iwan wants to "keep moving" and can't be persuaded to "go back" – but Sara convinces him to stay at least for a while in these new surroundings far removed from the troubles they have left behind and help Stanley dig his hole. "There's something about this place," she observes, "Everything we need is right here." Yet as the two ambivalent lovers work through the guilt and shame of their past, and as Sara learns more of taciturn Stanley's own sad history, three proves a crowd – even as a fourth presence (a young boy played by Benjamin Moruzzi) occasionally haunts the farm's interior spaces. In his feature debut, Gareth Bryn, veteran director of Welsh television programmes, expertly turns the screws on a scenario already taut with erotic tension, psychodrama and mystery.

"There's water everywhere," Stanley reassures Iwan after the younger man wonders aloud whether the well will ever reach deep enough to hit a liquid source. As if in confirmation of Stanley's words, *The Passing* positively drips with the imagery of wetness: the river and rain outside the farmhouse; the leaks and rising



Waterworld: Dyfan Dwyfor

Risen

Spain/USA 2015
Director: Kevin Reynolds
Certificate 12A 107m 28s

Reviewed by Leigh Singer

By a quirk of UK press-screening scheduling, I watched *Risen* the night after seeing the new Coen brothers film *Hail, Caesar!*, whose eponymous film-within-a-film's climax features George Clooney's Roman soldier experiencing divine revelation at the foot of Christ's cross. This transformation is effectively *Risen*'s entire plot, though whereas the Coens are expertly ribbing Hollywood's grandiose biblical productions of the 1950s and 1960s, here the opening banner of Sony's faith-based division Affirm Films quickly confirms a more devout retelling of the Greatest Story Ever Told, no ironic exclamation mark required.

That said, Kevin Reynolds's film makes concerted efforts to offer an updated, modernised testament. Told from the perspective of Joseph Fiennes's world-weary tribune Clavius, this is a gospel according to TV procedurals of the *Law & Order* and *Without a Trace* kind. After the body of Yeshua (Jesus is known throughout by his Hebrew name) mysteriously vanishes from his sealed tomb, Reynolds and co-writer Paul Aiello stage the ensuing events as a political manhunt led by Clavius and eager acolyte Lucius, a race against time before occupational Roman rule is threatened by native insurgency. To all intents and purposes, Yeshua's not the Messiah, he's a very missing boy.

These early sections of the film are its most convincing, with both Fiennes's committed performance and the veteran Reynolds's lean, muscular storytelling surprisingly propulsive and free of sentiment. "Did you find the Nazarene... different?" enquires Peter Firth's harried Pilate. "I found him dead," shoots back

Joseph Fiennes

Clavius, who – much like Tommy Lee Jones's relentless US Marshal in *The Fugitive* (1993) – is initially less interested in his quarry's motives for disappearing than in re-establishing the status quo. If *Risen* doesn't completely avoid unintentional humour or bombast – rummaging through Yeshua's empty tomb, Clavius unearths a cloth very like the now debunked Turin Shroud – there's a pleasingly workaday texture to its rhythms and look, while its well-chosen locations (Spain, Malta) blend well with Stefano Maria Ortolani's lived-in production design.

Inevitably, though, when Clavius finally tracks down a stigmata-marked Yeshua, both he and the film fall in thrall to His miraculous return. Maori-descended Cliff Curtis, whose saturnine looks have led to frequent all-purpose ethnic Hollywood casting, is likely a more realistic Yeshua than traditionally fair-skinned, blue-eyed screen Christs from Jeffrey Hunter to Jim Caviezel. But once *Risen* deals in resurrection, its attempts to challenge the conventional narrative become equally cosmetic. In a way, Yeshua's onscreen miracles are instructive: quietly effective when subtle but, when straining for transcendence as in the climactic ascension money shot, displaying all the grace and grandeur of a cheap screen saver.

Risen, then, easily clears the habitually low bar set by faith-based films, though it's ultimately undermined by its own conviction.

And while it's unfair to judge most contemporary film-makers by the Coens' masterful standards, their work often embodies the ongoing, questioning struggle of spiritual searching, rather than preaching

clear-cut answers to the already converted. As *Hail, Caesar!*'s sagely observes, would that it were so simple. **B**



Credits and Synopsis

Producers
Kate Crowther
Ed Taltan
Writer
Ed Taltan
Story
Ed Taltan
Peter Watkins-Hughes
Director of Photography
Richard Stoddard
Editor
Sara Jones
Production Designer
Tim Dickel
Composer
Jeremy Holland-Smith
Sound Recordist
Robin Gerrard
Costume Designer
Sian Jenkins
©Steven Stanley Ltd
Production Companies
SAC and Film In Colour

Cymru Wales present a Severn Screen production in association with Boom Cymru
Supported by Film Cymru Wales, National Lottery through the Arts Council of Wales
Executive Producers
Gwair Marina Lloyd
Loni Llewellyn Davies
Christos Michaels
Hannah Thomas
Cast
Mark Lewis Jones
Stanley
James Dwy
Sara
Dylan Dwyfor
Iwan
Benjamin Monazal
Alun
In Colour

[2.35:1] Subtitles
Distributor
Miracle Communications
Welsh theatrical title
Y Ymadawlad

Wales, present day. Stanley's isolated existence at a remote farmhouse is disrupted when a car crashes into the River Severn nearby. Stanley brings unconscious Sara to his house, along with her lover Iwan. Iwan wants to move on, but Sara persuades him to stay a while and help Stanley dig a well. While the men work, Sara repeatedly glimpses a young boy. She suffers morning sickness but keeps her pregnancy secret from Iwan. She also encourages taciturn, childlike Stanley to open up about his past: as a boy, he was present when his brother Alun drowned; when his parents had to move on, he hid from them and from a police search party in order to stay behind with his dead brother.

Iwan, confusing Sara's friendship with Stanley for something more, attempts several times to leave, and becomes aggressive. Sara miscarries. In a fit of jealousy, Iwan tells Stanley that he can keep Sara, and reveals that she is in fact his sister. In a tussle with Stanley, Iwan falls into the well. Sara confesses to Stanley the shame her incest has caused her. While bathing, Sara sees the boy again. Hand in hand with Alun, Stanley invites Sara to stay there with them. Sara flees – and emerges, alone and gasping, from the waters of the Severn, where she and Iwan have been in a car accident.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Mickey Liddell
Patrick Aiello
Pete Shalmon
Screenplay
Kevin Reynolds
Paul Aiello
Story
Paul Aiello
Director of Photography
Lorenzo Senatore
Editor
Steven Michovich
Production Designer
Stefano Maria Ortolani
Muscle
Rogue Baños
Sound Mixer
Jorge Adrados
Costume Designers
Mauricio Milandetti
Giovanni Casarino
LD Entertainment and Big Wheel Entertainment film
A Spanish-US co-production between 50 Dias Producciones A.I.E., Fifty Days Productions LLC and Cello Cruzada S.L.
Executive Producers
Robert Huberman
Scott Holmoy
Cast
Joseph Fiennes
Clavius
Tom Felton
Lucius
Peter Firth
Pilate
Maria Botto
Mary Magdalene
Luis Callejo
Jones
Antonie Gil
Joseph of Arimathea
Richard Atwell
Polybus
Cliff Curtis
Yeshua
Stewart Scudamore
Peter
Doity Digital

In Colour
[2.35:1]
Distributor
Sony Pictures
Releasing UK

Judea, 33 AD. Roman soldier Clavius is tasked with quelling revolts among the local people, who have been inspired by the 'messiah' Yeshua. When Yeshua is sentenced to death, prefect Pontius Pilate orders Clavius to attend the crucifixion and make sure the body is buried in a sealed tomb: he suspects Yeshua's followers of plotting to exhume the corpse to fulfil a prophecy that he will rise again after three days. Clavius assigns guards to the tomb but they get drunk; the tomb is broken into and the body disappears. Ambitious young soldier Lucius is sent to help Clavius find the body and prevent an uprising before Emperor Tiberius's imminent arrival.

Clavius's search leads to Yeshua's allies – his disciples, led by Peter, and the former prostitute Mary Magdalene. Tracking them to a hidden rendezvous, Clavius is stunned to see Yeshua among them, the crucifixion nail marks in his hands clearly visible. Overwhelmed by this encounter, Clavius informs Pilate that he must investigate the mystery alone; he follows the disciples as they search again for Yeshua. Pilate dispatches soldiers, led by Lucius, to hunt them all down, but Clavius uses his military expertise to help the disciples avoid the Romans, disarming Lucius when he corners them. Lucius lets them go free. Later, Clavius and the disciples are reunited with Yeshua, who performs two miracles in front of them, before ascending to heaven. Clavius parts company with the disciples, now a true believer.

10 Cloverfield Lane

USA 2016
Director: Dan Trachtenberg
Certificate 12A 103m 28s

Reviewed by Adam Nayman

The apocalyptic tenor of contemporary American life and politics is probably the best thing that could have happened to *10 Cloverfield Lane*, which focuses on a heartland Chicken Little who's descended into a homemade bunker to wait out doomsday – with a couple of dubious houseguests in tow. The pre-release speculation about the film focused on how it would connect to the 2008 handheld *Godzilla* riff *Cloverfield*: would it be a sequel? A prequel? A genetically engineered clone? The answer to all these questions is a resounding 'maybe'; Josh Campbell, Matt Stuecken and Damien Chazelle's screenplay leaves plenty of wiggle room for fan theories, and you're welcome to your own once you've seen it. But Dan Trachtenberg's feature debut is more resonant as a very *au courant* study of authoritarian power and paranoia than an exercise in brand extension.

While driving away from a busted relationship, aspiring fashion designer Michelle (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) is (accidentally?) run off the road by another driver. When she wakes up a few days later, she's chained to a wall in a stranger's basement. The filmmakers extend this nightmarish scenario as long as they can without playing their hand, smartly turning their heroine into a surrogate for the viewer's confusion. By the time Michelle is officially greeted by her host, Howard (John Goodman) – a heavily bearded bachelor who shows up armed with a hypodermic needle just in case – we're already firmly on her side, at which point *10 Cloverfield Lane* unleashes the first of its many narrative reversals: Howard tells Michelle that the US has been levelled by a massive terror attack, and this dank, concrete cell is actually the safest place on earth, for the time being.

Goodman has long been one of the great American character actors, and here he smartly draws on the iconic working-class heroism



Apocalypse now: Mary Elizabeth Winstead

(and button-down plaid wardrobe) of his role in *Roseanne*. Now, the loveable-dad persona is complicated by a creepy possessiveness (he clothes Michelle in his dearly departed daughter's clothes) and the possibility that he's either a wingnut or a coldly calculating liar; and either way, as long as you're living in his house, young lady, you'll obey his rules. Howard's story is seemingly corroborated by Emmett (John Gallagher Jr), the young man who helped him build the shelter and came to hide inside when the bombs started falling, and there's enough ambiguity in their relationship – and Emmett's attraction to Michelle – to pump *10 Cloverfield Lane* full of deliciously uncertain vibes. A lingering close-up of a jigsaw puzzle missing a few key pieces becomes emblematic of the film's approach.

The problem is that once the (bigger) picture finally gets filled in, the resultant portrait reveals a certain lack of imagination. Give *10 Cloverfield Lane* credit for taking the feverish temperature of a country paralysed by its fear of the great unknown, but on a more basic level its final sequences feel like a cop-out – a capitulation to the same audience expectations it skillfully tweaks for so much of its running time. **C**

Credits and Synopses

Produced by
L.J. Abrams
Lindsey Weber
Screenplay
Josh Campbell
Matt Stuecken
Damien Chazelle
Story
Josh Campbell
Matt Stuecken
Directed by
Photography
Jeff Cutter
Edited by
Steven Grube
Production Designer
Ramsey Avery
Music by Score
Conducted by
Bear McCreary
Sound Mixer
Michael B. Koff
Costume Designer
Meghan McLaughlin
Luster
Stunt Co-ordinator
Lex Geddings
Visual Effects
Visual Optical, Inc.
©Paramount Pictures Corporation
Production

Companies
Paramount Pictures
presents a Bad
Robot production
with the participation
of Louisiana
Entertainment,
Jefferson Office
of Film
Executive Producers
Bryan Burk
Drew Goddard
Matt Reeves
Cast
John Goodman
Howard
Mary Elizabeth
Winstead
Michelle
John Gallagher Jr.
Emmett
Douglas M. Griffin
driver
Suzanne Cryer
woman
Bradley Cooper
voice of Ben
Sunnee Montana
voice on radio
Frank Mottek
radio broadcaster

Louisiana, the present. Breaking up with her boyfriend, Michelle drives away from their apartment. In the middle of the night, she's sideswiped by a truck and plunges over a bridge. She awakes in the basement of Howard, who tells her the world outside has been rendered uninhabitable by a biochemical attack. She also meets Emmett, Howard's neighbour, who helped him build the shelter and then forced his way inside once he heard about the catastrophe. Michelle doesn't believe Howard and tries to escape, but when she spots an infected, dying woman through the window at the top of the bunker's ladder, she's convinced. Later, when Michelle is sent to fix an air filter, she finds evidence that Howard may have been keeping another young woman in the bunker – possibly his daughter Megan, who he claims left years ago to live in Chicago with her mother. Michelle and Emmett concoct a plan to build a hazmat suit, but Howard becomes suspicious, shooting Emmett and dissolving his body in acid. Michelle makes a break for it, burning Howard with the acid and escaping through an air vent as the bunker burns. Outside, she finds the air is breathable, but then spots a huge spaceship in the sky; she's stalked by a predatory alien. The ship begins to pull her car into the sky, but she connects a Molotov cocktail and destroys it. She hears a call for help from Houston on the car radio and heads in that direction.

clang; a moment later we hear muffled screams and hammerings on the door. Not for long, though.

Nemes uses that same lethal clang to close several sequences, pairing it with a cut to black, as if to convey that everyone held in the camp, no matter their status, is effectively in the death chamber. From this perspective, Saul's desperate quest to find a rabbi to say Kaddish over the dead boy he claims is his son is perhaps ultimately no more futile than the plotting of his fellow Sonderkommandos (privileged prisoners who help to control the rest) to escape. "You failed the living for the dead," he's told when his monomania causes him to botch a vital mission; but from this abyss – as the film's last offscreen sound effect tells us with grim finality – no one in the end can escape.

Is the boy Saul finds gasping and all but dead, sole survivor of the gas chamber, really his son? A fellow prisoner who evidently knew Saul before insists that he never had a son, though if he did and the boy was born (as he suggests) outside his marriage, there's a hint that the young woman called Ella, with whom he has a charged, near-wordless exchange, might be the mother. In the final analysis it hardly matters. In the film's closing moments, Saul sees another boy, alive this time, and his joyous smile tells us that this putative son, real or not, has become his purpose – a personal expiation for what he's done to his fellow Jews and a reason for persisting. As Nemes commented when he accepted his Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film earlier this year, "Even in the darkest hours, there might be a voice within us that allows us to remain human."

We're never told in which camp the film is set, though given that all Hungarian Jews were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and that an actual rebellion by Sonderkommandos took place there in late 1944, we can assume this is the intended location. An indication of the date comes in a snatch of whispered conversation suggesting that Soviet forces are about to take Krakow, which would place the action in January 1945. Certainly the increasing urgency, even desperation, with which the prisoners are despatched would bear this out; since the ovens are full of bodies, a later trainload of new arrivals bypass the gas chamber altogether, and are shoved straight into a pit, shot and burnt.

All this chimes with the callous terminology of assembly-line extermination: dead bodies are "pieces", money and valuables harvested from the dead are "the shiny". Repeatedly, we're shown the Sonderkommandos shovelling up great heaps of the grey ashes to which the camp's victims have been reduced, and whose dust chokes the air – the living, soon to die themselves, are literally breathing in the dead. At the same time, there's a determination that future generations should know the truth: we see inmates taking photographs with smuggled cameras, or writing diaries to be concealed in the hope of later discovery, messages from the dead to the living.

It has sometimes been suggested that there's little more to be said, in cinematic terms, about the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, that it has been churned over too often. The single-minded power and visceral immediacy of Nemes's achievement, rightly acclaimed and awarded, prove otherwise. **B**

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

Directors: Glenn Ficarra, John Requa
Certificate 15 111m 38s

Reviewed by Violet Lucca

It hasn't always been easy to be a fan of Tina Fey. And as time goes on, the comedian's blind spots—in relation to race and her choice of projects—have made it increasingly inadvisable. While her contributions to *30 Rock*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Saturday Night Live* (the 'Meet Your Second Wife' sketch has few peers) have demonstrated her unique comedic talents, Fey's forays into feature films have by and large traded in generic and lowest-common-denominator humour. While *Mean Girls* (2004), though imperfect, took an interesting premise and bore the mark of its author (even if her acting was limited), the alternately maudlin and cutesy-vulgar *Sisters* (2015) couldn't have been done by anyone.

Fey's latest vehicle, based on Kim Barker's memoir of going from the *Chicago Tribune* newsroom to being an embedded journalist in Afghanistan and Pakistan, seems to have a promising pedigree, written by Robert Carlock (who's worked with Fey on *30 Rock* and *Kimmy Schmidt*) and directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa (who've written/directed the superb *Bad Santa*, *I Love You Phillip Morris* and *Crazy Stupid, Love*). However, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (the NATO phonetic alphabet for 'WTF') ultimately comes off as a less offensive and slightly funnier version of Barry Levinson's recent *Rock the Kasbah*, which pointlessly used the people of Afghanistan as a backdrop for a tale of an American's self-discovery and some lame punchlines about oppression.

Like the denizens of that film, Fey's Kim Barker is initially sent to Kabul because she's not really cutting it at home: an unmarried woman in her forties without children, she simply shuttles between the office, her apartment and the gym; she's considered eligible to be promoted to on-air talent, despite having zero experience, because no one will sue her bosses if she dies while abroad. In the 'Kabubble', she's taken under the wing of fellow journalist Tanya Vandepool (Margot Robbie), who advises her on the gender imbalance—she's "Kabul cute", promoted from "a New York City four" to "an eight".

Kim, who comes off like a more relaxed version of Liz Lemon, embraces the city's hermetic nightlife (all the expats party like they're in their



Adrenaline addict: Tina Fey

early twenties) and learns to navigate interview requests with randy, corrupt officials like Ali Massoud Sadiq (Alfred Molina), the perpetually grinning head of the ministry of vice and virtue who has a four-poster bed behind a curtain in his office. (Given Molina's infamous turn as Sayed Mahmoody in 1991's Iran-smearing *Not Without My Daughter*, his unrepentant goofiness here can almost be seen as a corrective.)

Gradually, Kim becomes more addicted to the rush of getting bigger and bigger stories, and starts putting herself and her fixer at risk. As this impulse intensifies, the American public's interest in Afghanistan wanes, which pushes Kim further into crisis: to lose interest in Afghanistan is to lose her fun, exciting life. In the film's ultimate act of outlandish self-centredness, Kim pulls some strings and has the Marines rescue her photographer boyfriend Iain (Martin Freeman) from kidnappers, and reports on it for PR purposes.

While much of what goes on in *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* seems like pandering oversimplification (Molina's character, for example) or is outright insensitive (as Kim tells her fixer, "I know you like your women to be beautiful, mysterious Ikea bags"), it's important to bear in mind that this is the level of commentary that seemingly respectable news organisations trade in—the *New York Times* was still running 'my first burqa' stories more than ten years into the war—if they even bother to cover Afghanistan at all. This film is a symptom of a larger problem, and not the disease. **C**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Lorne Michaels
Tina Fey
Jan Bryce
Screenplay
Robert Carlock
Based on the book *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* by Kim Barker
Director of

Photography
Xavier Gribet
Editor
Jan Kovac
Production Designer
Beth Mickie
Music
Nick Urata
Production Sound Mixer
Benjamin Patrick
Costume Designer
Lisa Lewis

Production Companies
Paramount Pictures presents a Broadway Video/Little Stranger production
Executive Producers
Charles Gugglik
Eric Gurian
Sam Grey

Cast
Tina Fey
Kim Baker
Margot Robbie
Martin Freeman
Iain MacKeague
Alfred Molina
Ali Massoud Sadiq
Christopher Abbott
Fahim Ahmadza
Nicholas Braun
Tali Eiran

Stephen Peacocke
Nic
Sheila Vand
Shakira Khar
Evan Jonigkeit
Lance Corporal
Specialist Andrew
Coughlin
Billy Bob Thornton
Colonel Walter
Holmes
Dolby Digital

Datasat
In Colour
[1.85:1]
Distributor
Paramount
Pictures UK

New York. 2003. Journalist Kim Baker impulsively decides to leave her desk job to become an on-air reporter in Afghanistan. A year later she is embedded with the Marines and is seen reporting on a bombed girls' school in Kandahar. Kim hooks up with Iain, a photographer, and discovers that her story on the school won't air. Her friend and fellow reporter Tanya uses footage of a drone

attack to get a job at Kim's network, effectively replacing her. Kim files to New York to fight for her job, and discovers Tanya's betrayal. In Kabul, Iain is kidnapped; Kim uses her influence with the Marines to have him rescued. She decides to return to New York, leaving Iain behind. He is interviewed on her cable news show; they make plans to have coffee when he comes to New York.

Zootropolis

USA 2016
Directors: Byron Howard, Rich Moore
Certificate PG 108m 23s

Reviewed by Andrew Osmond

Disney's CG cartoon *Zootropolis* is co-directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore. The latter was also responsible for the studio's *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and the new film is in the same mould—another witty, inventive comedy-adventure, this time set in a city where animals have evolved intelligence and live side by side, though with residual tensions between predators and herbivores.

A spoof police procedural, *Zootropolis* has a bright-eyed female rabbit cop (voiced by Ginnifer Goodwin) investigating a missing-person case and roping in a reluctant hustler fox (Jason Bateman) to help her. It's funny from the first scene (a school play explaining the film's world) and stays consistently comic for the first two-thirds. Highlights include the cop's shock at an animal 'nudist' centre and a heavily trailed scene with maddeningly glacial sloths. Many gags play on the extreme differences in scale between the animals—for example, the rabbit chases a crook into a district of tiny rodents, where both characters are suddenly tiny knocking over buildings.

Whereas *Wreck-It Ralph*'s 'real' videogame heroes provided a hook for older viewers, they may shun a film set in a funny-animal world. But *Zootropolis* is one of the most overtly political Hollywood cartoon features, perhaps reflecting Moore's past as a *Simpsons* episode director. There are jabs at tokenism, stereotyping, racial profiling and hatemongering (the dialogue slyly points out that animal predators are actually a minority). Expect Donald Trump to denounce *Zootropolis* as liberal brainwashing. The last act turns serious, managing a sharp change in tone more compellingly than some previous cartoons have done, but with a lowering of invention in the rather rote climax. For most of the way, though, it's a smart cartoon comedy. The sloths alone will ensure that *Zootropolis* is remembered. **B**

Credits and Synopsis

Co-directed by
Jared Bush
Produced by
Clark Spencer
Screenplay
Jared Bush
Phil Johnston
Story
Byron Howard
Jared Bush
Rich Moore
Created and
produced by Walt
Disney Animation
Studios
Executive Producer
John Lasseter

Michael Giacchino
Sound Designer
Addison Ingalls
Head of Animation
Renato Des Anjos
©Disney
Enterprises, Inc.
Distribution Companies
Disney presents
Created and
produced by Walt
Disney Animation
Studios
Voice Cast
Ginnifer Goodwin
Judy Hopps
Jason Bateman
Nick Wilde
Hris Eba
Chief Bogo
Jenny Slate
Bellwether
Nate Torrence
Clauslauser

Bonnie Hunt
Bonnie Hopps
Don Lake
Shu Hops
Tommy Chong
Yax
J.K. Simmons
Mayor Lionheart
Octavia Spencer
Mrs Otterton
Alan Tudyk
Dale Gribble
Shakira
Gazelle
Judy Hopps
Jason Bateman
Nick Wilde
Hris Eba
Chief Bogo
Jenny Slate
Bellwether
Nate Torrence
Clauslauser

Voice Cast

Some screenings presented in 3D
Distributor
Buena Vista
International (UK)
US theatrical title
Zootopia

In a world of intelligent animals, female rabbit Hopps joins the police force and, with the help of fox hustler Wilde, uncovers a terrible secret that threatens animal coexistence.

Home cinema



Pony expressive: the celebrated opening sequence of *Elgar*, with the young composer riding through the Malverns

IMMORTAL KEN

The arts features Ken Russell made at the BBC reveal a visionary filmmaker with an infuriating gift for self-sabotage

KEN RUSSELL: THE GREAT COMPOSERS

Ken Russell, UK 1962-68; BBC/BFI/Region B Blu-ray, Region 2 DVD; 210 minutes; Certificate PG; 1.33:1. Features: Elgar commentary by Michael Kennedy and Ken Russell; 'The Debussy Film' commentary by Kevin Flanagan; 'Song of Summer' commentary by Ken Russell; Michael Bradsett interview; 'Land of Hope and Glory' (1931); Elgar and the Three Choirs Festival (1929-32); illustrated booklet

KEN RUSSELL: THE GREAT PASSIONS

Ken Russell, UK 1965-67; BBC/BFI/Region B Blu-ray, Region 2 DVD; 202 minutes; Certificate PG; 1.33:1. Features: 'Always on Sunday' and 'Dante's Inferno' commentaries by Brian Hoyle; 'Isadora' commentary by Paul Sutton; Michael Bradsett; Late Night Line Up: Russell at Work (1966); 'The Paul Sutton Tapes' – cast and crew interviews as alternative audio track to Isadora; illustrated booklet

Reviewed by Robert Hanks

Is any director more maddening than Ken Russell? Such talent, such a gift for composing

images of simple beauty, such an ability to coax (or allow) actors to mine depths of feeling in front of the camera; such boundless enthusiasm for art, feeling and sensuality – boundless being an important word: he was driven by a frustration, perhaps a rage, at the fences society erects between high and low, sacred and profane, spirit and flesh. But in his zeal to smash them, he seems to have failed to understand that barricades have their uses; and – this may be the same mistake – seems to have failed to understand where his talents lay: though humour and eroticism were essential undercurrents in his work, his outright jokes and overt sexiness tended to fall flat, undermined by his oddly literal turn of mind – you can see it in action when Roger Daltrey rides a 12-foot penis in *Lisztomania* (1975) or when Robert Powell, in the title role of *Mahler* (1974), celebrates his conversion from Judaism to Roman Catholicism by sinking his teeth into a pig's snout while Cosima Wagner, in leather skirt and stormtrooper's helmet, sings to the tune of 'The Ride of the Valkyrie', 'No longer a Jewboy / Winning strength through joy...' At times, Russell was like one of those newspaper cartoonists who draw a pig in a top hat with wads of bank notes stuffed into every orifice, then label it CAPITALIST in case you miss the point.

Writing here a couple of months ago about

'Pop Goes the Easel', Russell's *Monitor* film about Pop artists, I asked the rhetorical question: do any of his cinema films succeed as well as his best TV work? I don't quite believe the conclusion that implies (at the very least, I'd make an exception for *Women in Love*). But the constraints of TV seem to have worked for him. Even in the 60s, when Hugh Greene's regime allowed the legend to arise of the BBC as a bohemian, establishment-baiting Camelot, it was a bureaucratic, prissy institution, riddled with odd rules. As he explains to the great music critic Michael Kennedy in the commentary for *Elgar* (1962) – the earliest film on these two new discs – *Monitor*, Huw Wheldon's innovative arts magazine, did not permit actors to speak or be shot in close-up. That forced Russell to create the film's tableau style – hence, in part, the startling, rhapsodic opening shots of young Elgar riding his pony across the Malverns. (Would Alan Clarke and David Rudkin have created *Penda's Fen*, in which Elgar's music and the Malvern Hills become the core of a prophetically inspired Englishness, without Russell's example?) Elgar's silence emphasises Russell's theme – the grand old man of Empire as outsider struggling to make himself heard.

By contrast, the apparent freedoms of *The Debussy Film* (1965) – a larger cast with proper speaking roles, a budget to shoot abroad – are

misused. The conceit of Melvyn Bragg's script is that a film crew is making a biography of Debussy, and the leading actor (Oliver Reed – well cast as far as looks go) has affairs with his leading ladies that mirror the composer's own love life. This has been excused as a way of linking *fin de siècle* Paris with the bohemianism of the 60s, of making art relevant; but the high jinks feel forced, more like an apology for or a distraction from the real world of art and music. Both Russell and Reed are out of sympathy with Debussy's inwardness and seriousness, his devotion to technique. Russell indulges himself, lingering over his images: for the piece 'Fêtes', from the *Nocturnes* for orchestra, an impression of night-time festivities in a city. Russell offers a religious procession, men in white KKK-style hoods totting images of the Virgin. It's simply the wrong picture – Catholicism was Russell's bugbear, not the quasi-pagan Debussy's.

But trying to generalise about Russell is a mug's game: in *Song of Summer* (1968) Russell exploits freedoms of form and location to create his most satisfying work in any medium, and he is not shy about illustrating the technical side of composing. The difference, perhaps, is that Russell has Delius's amanuensis Eric Fenby – the self-taught Catholic boy, the outsider, like Elgar, like Ken himself – to identify with. Max Adrian's ageing, blind and ill Delius feels less cinematic than theatrical; but for the purposes of this drama it doesn't matter – his monumental quality is part of the treat. There is a teasing, ambiguous aspect: how do we reconcile Delius's austerity and imperiousness with the lushness of his music? Is he really a sentimentalist in disguise, and does he know that he is?

I saw this first when I was in my teens, and remember being surprised to find myself crying at the end, as Delius's widow scatters petals over his corpse. It remains mysteriously moving, its alchemy of sentimentality and starkness, the lurches between larkiness and pain defying analysis. The acting is frequently artificial and unconvincing – particularly Christopher Gable as Fenby; but his awkwardness evokes the viewer's sympathy. It must be one of the most beautiful films ever made for television: on this Blu-ray, the gradations of black-and-white are superbly subtle (possible essay question: "It all went wrong for Ken Russell when he started filming in colour." Discuss).

The disc of *The Great Passions* does not have anything to match this, though *Isadora Duncan, The Biggest Dancer in the World* (1966) comes close. The title should alert you to the film's central evasion – Duncan was big, certainly, for a while a huge box-office draw and for much longer a celebrated guru, a prophetess of 'natural movement'; but was she any good? Russell seems to think not, but his opinion is counterbalanced by the narration by Sewall Stokes (an elderly English writer who had made a long career out of his comparatively brief association with Duncan at the end of her life), and most importantly, by Vivian Pickles's magnificently self-possessed central performance. The opening sequence, in which the main events of her life are announced as headlines over speeded-up

film, conveys intensity as well as absurdity; and Pickles maintains the tension between the two. She encompasses superbly the transition from glad confident youth, glowing with rapture at her own slightly galling grace, through tragedy to raddled middle age – receiving an admirer's bouquet from with the glum pronouncement "I lay this wreath on the grave of my hopes."

The other two films are far less satisfactory. *Always on Sunday* (1965), a portrait of the painter Henri Rousseau, starts well, with a comically literal picture of the 50-year-old Rousseau's transition from civil servant (hence his nickname, Le Douanier) to painter of tigers and lush tropical scenes. But the comedy starts to feel overdone – ostensibly, the film is on Rousseau's side against the philistine establishment that ridiculed his primitivism; but Russell's broad, farcical approach seems to endorse the establishment view. *Dante's Inferno* (1967) is even less interested in the art, as you might deduce from the subtitle: *The Private Life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* – though, to be fair, Russell does seem at times to have genuinely thought that art was a product of sexual licence, in which case the Pre-Raphaelites' domestic travails were fair game. But it is a messy film, nuances of feeling pushed aside by gags and phantasmagoria. Though this was a year before *A Song of Summer*, the final scenes – Oliver Reed's Rossetti suffering hallucinations of snakes writhing over his face and a zombie bride rising from her coffin – already look past that triumph of art, and forward to the crass horrors of *The Lair of the White Worm*.

Ken Russell was driven by a frustration at the fences society erects between high and low, sacred and profane



Oliver Reed as Rossetti in *Dante's Inferno*

New releases

AMERICAN HORROR PROJECT

**MALATESTA'S CARNIVAL OF BLOOD/
THE PREMONITION/ THE WITCH
WHO CAME FROM THE SEA**

Christopher Speeth/Robert Allen Schnitzer/Matt Cimber; USA 1973/76/75, Arrow Films/Region Free/0 Blu-ray and DVD: 74/93/83 minutes; 1.85:1/1.85:1/2.35:1. Features: essays, interviews, making-of documentaries, new and original artwork, outtakes, script drafts, vintage shorts

Reviewed by Michael Atkinson

A lavish labour of post-grindhouse love, this box-set rescues three intensely odd drive-in genre films from the 70s that, in their subsequent disappearance or rarity, had become almost mythic. This is particularly true of *Malatesta's Carnival of Blood*, which stuck in the brain pleats of certain American 'monster culture' youngsters at the time (yes, me) after a gushing rave about it ran in the shortlived tabloid periodical *The Monster Times*. In the August 1973 issue, reviewer R. Allen Leider (a writer of Young Adult fiction and comics who once did cameos in porn) pulled out all the stops, declaring Christopher Speeth's weirdo indie to be "without question the goriest, bloodiest, most frightening film ever made ANYWHERE. And it's funny, too." It's none of these things, Leider imagined scenes that aren't in the film, and asserted that it was more like *Camino Real* than *Greaser's Palace*, when it resembles neither.

Still, in 1973, Speeth's movie sounded essential. But it never had a release, and didn't surface in any way until now. A Herschell Gordon Lewis-influenced occasion for bad makeup and orange paint-blood, about a family lost at night in a ghoulish-haunted carnival, the film does accrete a creepy sense of what it's like to not sleep all night, with a fascinating craft-shop set built entirely from plastic sheeting, papier mâché and junked cars, and a subliminal soundtrack of 'psycho-acoustics' comprising animal noises, backwards cymbal crashes and industrial droning. And did I mention Hervé Villechaze as a cannibal?

By comparison, Matt Cimber's idiosyncratic *The Witch Who Came from the Sea* is a frantic psychodrama in which a deranged and often nude Millie Perkins goes on a SoCal killing spree of luckless football players and movie stars. Meanwhile, Robert Allen Schnitzer's *The Premonition* follows a maniacal woman (Ellen Barber) and her carnival-clown boyfriend (Richard Lynch) plotting to steal her young daughter back from her foster mother, whose dreams somehow signal the future.

All three films exude a surprising degree of conviction, though only Speeth's arguably represents a mad passion for movieness.

Disc: Beautiful transfers, erudite essays (including one by Kim Newman on *Malatesta*) and copious ancillaries telling you more than you ever wanted to know about films you've only heard about. Another cinephile mystery resolved.

New releases

AUTUMN ALMANAC

Béla Tarr; Hungary 1985; Artificial Eye/
Region 2 DVD; Certificate 15; 115 minutes; 1.37:1

Reviewed by Charlie Fox

Before he was the cinematic giant reigning over his apocalyptic monochrome wilderness, Béla Tarr created this chill character study. His fourth film and the last without the assistance of the author László Krasznahorkai, *Autumn Almanac* is a transitional experiment in which the director alternately tests the conventional ways of storytelling that he'll soon abandon and discovers the uncinematic methods that will make him great.

If none of the black dogs or devious prophets of future masterworks such as *Damnation* (1988) and *Sátántangó* (1994) are on the loose, they don't live far beyond the toxic fog swirling around the house we inhabit for the film's duration. All the spiteful drunks are slamming brandy, every scene is a beady conducted long take, and the mood of hellish gloom can be remedied by nothing but dark jokes. The only shock, other than characters who don't behave as if they're under a spell, is Tarr's extravagant play with colour, which saturates everything in acid green and gory red.

Those characters are a wretched bunch of sinners who attack each other and fall into dejected monologues. A mean-spirited son pesters his sick mother (Hédi Temessy) for his inheritance, alongside her sly nurse. A morose teacher shambles from room to room, confessing his failures and howling for love. Such is Tarr's acute attentiveness to all their variegated mental turmoil that he could've become the Eastern Bloc's Fassbinder, but the most astonishing sequences are those where this energy fades and a more ghoulish atmosphere takes hold. Watching a scene shot from below and under glass to mimic the perspective of someone buried alive, or the baroque tableau in which the cast are suddenly still as waxworks, it's inescapable: the real nightmares are about to begin.

Disc: The print is speckled with evidence of decay.

BANDE À PART

Jean-Luc Godard; France 1964; BFI/Region B Blu-ray/
Certificate PG; 96 minutes; 1.33:1; Features: audio commentary by Adrian Martin, interviews, video introduction by Ginette Vincendeau, 'Les Fiancés du Pont Mac Donald' by Agnès Varda, essay booklet

Reviewed by Kate Stables

Small, cheap, and quickly made (shot over 25 days in the chilly Parisian suburbs), Godard's frisky monochrome robbery tale was created in reaction to the Homeric efforts required by the lush, more commercial *Le Mépris* (1963). Too downbeat on release for its audience and too close to 1960's *Breathless* for the critics, it's a pivotal Godard piece, poised between New Wave energetic self-reflexivity and the politicised *Pierrot le fou* (1965). Long seen, as Amy Taubin put it, as "a Godard film for people who don't much care for Godard", it's more melancholy than its B-movie simplicity and famed playfulness suggest (the much copied Madison dance, a dash through the Louvre), with a central trio who are full of pathos, for all their flip swagger. Cinematographer Raoul Coutard's sharp grey tones and restless 'reportage' camerawork underline the skittish

nature of their interactions (he gives a nifty technical explanation in the extras).

The film's bookish underpinnings – a seam of literary riches from Queneau to Shakespeare – are unearthed by Adrian Martin's first-rate commentary, as detailed as an archaeological dig. Though he points up how the film faithfully rotates its interest between the trio, it's Anna Karina's dopey naive Odile who still draws the eye, pulled and pushed between Sami Frey and Claude Brasseur's aspirant toughs (there's a nod to *Jules et Jim*, here). Yes, she's created for mythic resonance not psychological realism (Ginette Vincendeau unpicks her deftly in the extras) but the mix of affection and misogyny the film heaps on her can still make one flinch.

Disc: A handsome transfer, full of drizzly Parisian detail. The film comes swaddled in extras, including a BFI interview with Karina and a host of video interviews with key Godard colleagues. But the killer component is Agnès Varda's silent charm-bomb *Les Fiancés du Pont Mac Donald*, with Godard himself as the bemused hero.

DEATH BY HANGING

Oshima Nagisa; Japan 1968; Criterion/Region A Blu-ray/
Region 1 DVD; 185:1; new interview with Tony Rayns, Oshima's 1965 experimental short documentary 'Diary of Yuribogi', trailer, essay by Howard Hampton, 1968 director's statement

Reviewed by Jordan Cronk

Today, Oshima Nagisa's reputation is based largely on his more provocative and perverse cinematic forays, and these tend to belie the equally devious streak of humour coursing through his lengthy filmography. In fact, as the most restless and radical of the Japanese New Wave directors, Oshima is both suitably representative of the movement's slyly comic complexion and the foremost example of its creative utility.

Death by Hanging came at almost the exact mid-point of his career and, whether by coincidence or design, embodies a number of his divergent artistic attributes – above all, perhaps, the anarchic sense of humour that other, more sober-minded directors might sublimate in the name of dramatic integrity.

Taking off from a 1958 incident in which a man of Korean ancestry raped and murdered

two Japanese schoolgirls, Oshima's film begins where that real-life ordeal ended: in the execution chamber, as the young man, here renamed simply R, is escorted to his state-sanctioned death. What transpires, however, is less disturbing than delirious, as R miraculously survives the hanging, sending the accompanying doctor, chaplain, warden and guards scrambling to justify a second pass at the execution.

Save for a brief foray to the site of the killings, the majority of the film takes place indoors, with Oshima staging the resulting delirium as a kind of macabre cabaret, all theatrical re-enactments and farcical moral squabbles. The allegory is less than subtle, and it is in no way meant to be. Oshima's Brechtian dramaturgy heightens the inherently ludicrous nature of the proceedings, as does the inexplicable resurrection of a dead woman who may or may not be R's sister. Altogether it amounts to one of the most biting political and surrealistic send-ups of capital punishment and cultural obstinacy ever conceived. But, importantly, the lunacy never hamstringing the critique; rather, it potentially distils and reframes the absurdity of much of what we accept at face value.

Disc: A typically informative video interview with Tony Rayns compliments Oshima's 1965 short *Diary of Yuribogi*, a spiritual predecessor to the explorations of Japanese xenophobia in *Death by Hanging*.

THE FRIENDS OF EDDIE COYLE

Peter Yates; USA 1973; Paramount/Eureka/Region B Blu-ray/
Region 2 DVD; 102 minutes; certificate 15; 1.85:1. Features: interviews with Peter Yates and Glenn Kenny, booklet.

Reviewed by Robert Hanks

It is tempting to classify Peter Yates's classic crime film as *noir*, but it is bleaker than that: Eddie Coyle's descent has a *noir*-ish inevitability, but none of the existential glamour – just the dismal fact that criminals spend much of their lives making excuses and pleading for favours, and they have few friends.

Oddly, this is one of only two films taken from a George V. Higgins novel (the other being Andrew Dominik's 2012 *Killing Them Softly*): much of the dialogue comes direct from the book, including Eddie's great opening speech, in which he invites a shifty gun-runner to count his knuckles: Eddie got four extra when a drawer was kicked shut on his fingers after he bought guns from the wrong guy.

As Eddie, Robert Mitchum gives his best late performance, even if his Boston accent is perfunctory – weary stoicism undermined by amiability and an inextinguishable optimism: maybe he can do enough informing to put himself in good with law enforcement without putting himself in bad with the mob. But he gets excellent support from, among other, Richard Jordan as a manipulative treasury agent and, in particular, Peter Boyle, oozing slippery menace as the barkeeper who is Eddie's most ambiguous friend. Acting, Yates's direction and Victor J. Kemper's cinematography are satisfyingly matter-of-fact – no frills, none of the overwrought action or cod philosophising that spoil Yates's *Bullitt* for me; Dave Grusin's score, alternately funky and spooky, is terrific.

Disc: A fine transfer does justice to



In the frame: Anna Karina in *Bande à part*

Revival

THE KING, HIS WIFE AND HIS LOVER

Chen Kaige's tale of desire and betrayal sweeps through half a century of tumultuous Chinese history

FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE

Chen Kaige, China 1993, BFI/Region B Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD, Certificate 15, 171 minutes, 1.85:1, Features: The Making of *Farewell My Concubine* documentary

Reviewed by Philip Kemp

"The theme of the film," says Chen Kaige in the documentary accompanying this release, "is betrayal." It's a theme that, for the director, must resonate with acute personal force. As a teenager during the Cultural Revolution, he was pressured into denouncing his own father, who was then sentenced to hard labour. (They were subsequently reconciled and his father, Chen Huaikai, worked on the film as art director.) Chen Kaige himself was sent off to perform manual labour in a rural area, an experience that may well have fed into *Concubine's* painfully Dickensian early scenes at the Peking Opera in the 1920s, all rigid discipline and brutal beatings for the boy novices. (All roles in the Opera were traditionally taken by males.)

The film scored a huge international success on its release in 1993, winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes, a Golden Globe, a Bafta and numerous other awards. It was less approved of in its home country, where it was twice banned, partly it seems for its gay storyline and partly for suggesting that anyone in the People's Republic in 1977 might ever be unhappy enough to commit suicide.

The sweep of the action is exhilarating, taking in all the major upheavals of half a century of Chinese history: the Warlord Era of the 1920s, the Japanese Occupation, the post-war ousting of the Kuomintang and the communist takeover, the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and (briefly referenced) the rule of the Gang of Four.

Chen's audacity lay in refracting all these 20th-century events through the archaic, unchanging rituals of the Peking (now Beijing) Opera: the formalised gestures, the ultra-stylised costumes and makeup, the shrilly stratospheric vocal renditions – all of which, though in fact dating back only to the 18th century, seem ancient enough to have originated in the era depicted in *Concubine's* key stage performance. This playlet, from which the film takes its title, represents the founding of the Han Dynasty around 200 BC with the defeat of the last King of Chu; he and his sole remaining, loyal concubine are the roles for which the lead characters, Duan Xiaolou (Zhang Fengyi) and Cheng Dieyi (Leslie Cheung), become celebrated. In fact, as far as we can see, these are virtually the only roles they ever play.

Throughout the film, the relationship between the king and his concubine is paralleled by that between Xiaolou and Dieyi. The latter, who always plays female roles on stage, is gay – and



Performance artist: Leslie Cheung as Cheng Dieyi in *Farewell My Concubine*

though it's hinted that the two men had a sexual relationship during their adolescence, by the time he's an adult Xiaolou is firmly heterosexual, an enthusiastic frequenter of the city's brothels. In one of them, the House of Blossoms, he meets the prostitute Juxian (Gong Li), who becomes his wife. Dieyi, wounded and jealous, never accepts Juxian, and much of the film's psychological tension stems from the fractured but still potent rapport between the two actors, with Juxian constantly uncertain where her husband's ultimate loyalties lie. This emotional tussle feeds into the film's most harrowing scene, when all three (and most of the Peking Opera troupe along with them) are hauled up before the Red Guard cadres of the Cultural Revolution and forced to abase themselves in a public self-denunciation.

In Cheung's performance, Dieyi becomes the passionate heart of the film. Xiaolou merely performs in the Opera, to Dieyi it's his life, all he lives for. Or, as Xiaolou tells him, "I merely play the king. You are the concubine Yu." Dieyi's single-minded dedication to his art leads him

Chen's audacity lay in refracting 20th-century events through the unchanging rituals of the Peking Opera

into dangerous paths: during the Occupation he performs for the Japanese authorities, since patriotism means nothing to him. All he cares about is that they appreciate the Opera, and after their defeat he's put on trial for collaborating with the enemy. But within his narcissistic personality there's a perverse streak of masochism; though witnesses (including Xiaolou) line up to testify that he only performed for the Japanese at gunpoint, he stubbornly denies it, shouting, "Why don't you just kill me?" He's only saved by being whisked away from the courtroom on the personal intervention of Chiang Kai-shek, who wants to see him perform.

On its initial US and UK release, distributed by Miramax, *Farewell My Concubine* was shown of some 15 minutes. Louis Malle, president of the Cannes jury that awarded Chen's film the Palme d'Or, commented scathingly that the cut version "seems longer because it doesn't make any sense." What we have here, fortunately, is the full 171-minute version, and especially on Blu-ray it looks magnificent, the rich blacks of the interiors and the resplendent reds and golds of the Opera scenes showing up in their full widescreen glory. The good-natured 'making of' offers some piquant insights, such as the contrasting reactions of Zhang and Cheung to the prospect of receiving bare-bottom wallopings with the flat of a stage sword. **B**

Lost and found

THE SIN OF HAROLD DIDDLEBOCK

OVERLOOKED FILMS CURRENTLY UNAVAILABLE ON UK DVD OR BLU-RAY

Hapless Harold Lloyd finds his American Dream skewered by cynical reality in a gleeful fable from director Preston Sturges

By Ian Mantgani

In 1944, having been the first Hollywood screenwriter-turned-director and one of the highest-paid men in America, creating a streak of masterpieces including *The Lady Eve* and *Sullivan's Travels* (both 1941), Preston Sturges left Paramount Pictures. His frustration with his home studio's meddling memos reached breaking point when it shelved *The Great Moment* (1944), flinching at its blend of comedy and earnest bioprogram, and tried to recut *Hail the Conquering Hero* (eventually deferring to Sturges's version after unpopular test screenings of their own).

Now, Sturges thought, would be his time. He would partner with millionaire pal Howard Hughes in launching California Pictures Corporation (Cal-Pix), and the crackling auteur of dialogue comedies would coax great silent buffoon Harold Lloyd back into talkies after an almost decade-long hiatus. The grand bargain of *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (1947) was born.

It's an odd, lurchingly brilliant comedy, shifting experimental gears before cruising as classic Sturges. In a postmodern move, the first ten minutes are footage directly lifted from *The Freshman* (1925), marking this as a pseudo-sequel to that silent comedy, in which Lloyd, playing a downtrodden college waterboy, found himself on the football field scoring a winning touchdown. Now, cut to the entrance of Raymond Walburn as advertising boss E.J. Waggleberry: "I am opportunity!" he promises, offering Lloyd's Diddlebock a bright future of employment on the spot.

Diddlebock reports for work; Waggleberry doesn't remember him ("I probably promised you a job, I usually do when I get excited"). Installed at entry level, Harold watches President Harding on the 1923 calendar transition to Coolidge, Hoover, Roosevelt, Roosevelt again and Truman – whereupon it's 1945, he's spent 22 years at the same desk and, having lost his "zing, zest and zowie", is dismissed by Waggleberry with parting gifts of a Swiss watch and a cheque for \$2,946.12 – which would have been more, of course, if it hadn't been for the stock market crash of 1929.

Drawing out the crestfallen, *Ikiru*-like poignancy, Harold approaches office beauty Miss Otis (Frances Ramsden). Having dreamed of marrying each of her sisters – Hortense, Irma, Margie, Harriet, Claire and Rosemary – when they too worked for the company, he bids Miss Otis a forlorn farewell and gives her the engagement ring he'd bought, so that her own love life can be free from financial burden.

Half an hour into the picture, Diddlebock finds himself in a saloon. The bartender, learning that



Harold Lloyd as the eponymous hero, with Jimmy Conlin as Wormy (and Jackie the Lion)

It's an odd, lurchingly brilliant comedy, shifting experimental gears before cruising as classic Sturges

Harold is a virgin to the demon rum, proclaims, "You arouse the artist in me!", frapping unnamed liquors into a cocktail named 'The Diddlebock'. "Ayyyeeuuugggh!" comes Diddlebock's scratching howl ("Say, is someone strangling a horse around here?"). When Harold's sin inspires him to gambling and winning, he wakes up wondering why he's bought a ten-gallon hat, a hansom cab (with driver), a bankrupt circus and 61 cats including a lion called Jackie. Now he finds himself with a new job: trying to offload these assets to bankers who might want to lighten their image by starting a free circus for the poor.

Diddlebock flows with Sturges motifs, from precise, eccentric dialogue mixed with slapstick

pratfalls to gleeful skewering of American Dream hypocrisy to the appearance of familiar Sturges players including Walburn, Franklin Pangborn and Al Bridge. By opening with a fable, answering it with cynical reality and reemerging into wish-fulfilment, Sturges offers a projection of his own hope to escape disillusionment by discarding caution. Even the ending, which seems a fantasy too far when the young Miss Otis marries the ageing Harold, proved prophetic of Sturges's personal desires – in 1951 he would marry Sandy Nagle, 29 years his junior.

For all this, *Diddlebock* was Sturges's Icarus moment. Lloyd argued for more physical comedy; Sturges emphasised spoken humour. The director compromised with, "We'll shoot it your way, we'll shoot it my way" – and a 64-day schedule swelled to a 116-day shoot. Hughes quickly ended the Sturges partnership, firing him from their next collaboration, *Vendetta*; he also yanked *Diddlebock* from cinemas, recutting and rereleasing it in 1950 as *Mad Wednesday*. This version ran 76 minutes instead of 89, added a talking horse, cut Rudy Vallee out and moved Lloyd's credit below the title, inspiring a lawsuit to the tune of \$750,000.

It was Lloyd's final role and, along with the failed eventual release of *The Great Moment*, the start of Sturges's commercial downward spiral. *Diddlebock* is now in public domain, but the only video transfers of the film have been blurry dupes; and while Brad Stevens recently offered an eloquent argument in this very column that powerful cinema can be resilient enough to overcome audiovisual obstacles, it's a slightly stricter proposition with comedy, whose disarming effect eases across most immediately through clear presentation. We saw a passable 35mm print at BFI Southbank's recent Sturges season, and hold out hope for a restoration – not impossible, given that there's just been one for *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*, another late Sturges film *maudit*. Perhaps, when there's a sharp hi-def version, we'll know for certain what the bartender puts in The Diddlebock. ☺

WHAT THE PAPERS SAID



"It's unabashedly corn and unashamedly burlesque. But it's basic comedy, the kind that can't fail to draw laughs." **Motion Picture Herald** 1 March 1947

"To compare the sequence of the pursuit of the lion along the window sill with the rather similar ascent of the skyscraper in 'Safety Last' is to realise how inferior is Sturges's technique in handling this type of material: the tempo and enthusiasm is missing, and the jokes fall flat." **Monthly Film Bulletin** June 1951

New releases

Kemper's grey, desolate Boston, and occasional sunlit suburban interludes. The sound on the 1996 NFT interview with Yates is frustrating – the booklet interview, which concentrates on *Eddie Coyle*, is better value. Glenn Kenny's critical appreciation is worthwhile (though he's wrong to say that Elmore Leonard borrowed the name Jack Brown from the gun-runner in this film: Leonard's character was Jacky Burke – Tarantino changed it for the film).

FILMS BY KITANO TAKESHI

HANA-BI

Japan 1997; Third Window Films/Region B
Blu-ray, 103 minutes; Certificate 18; 1.85:1

KIKUJIRŌ

Japan 1999; Third Window Films/Region B
Blu-ray, 122 minutes; Certificate 12; 1.85:1

DOLLS

Japan 2002; Third Window Films/Region B
Blu-ray, 113 minutes; Certificate 12; 1.85:1; Features: commentary ('Hana-Bi'), interviews ('Hana-Bi'), 'Dolls', making-of documentaries (all three).

Reviewed by Michael Brooke

The first film in which writer-director-actor Kitano Takeshi appeared after his near-fatal mid-1990s motorbike accident, *Hana-Bi* remains possibly the perfect introduction to his idiosyncratic oeuvre. If a basic plot summary seems to comprise one cliché after another (a tough cop, stricken with remorse after his partner is crippled by a bullet intended for him, considers turning to crime to raise money for a final holiday with his terminally ill wife), the film's formal originality remains dazzling, with unnerveing still moments interrupted by beautifully timed shock cuts and telling parallels drawn between the onscreen action and the former partner's intricate, symbol-crammed paintings (an autobiographical touch: these constituted Kitano's own post-accident therapy).

Ostensibly, *Kikujirō* offered a marked change of pace – it's a coming-of-age story about a young boy trying to track down his estranged mother with the aid of a good-for-nothing layabout, inveterate gambler and possible ex-gangster named Kikujirō (Kitano himself). So far so familiar odd-couple road movie, but Kitano's fingerprints quickly become apparent as the pair encounter various eccentrics along the way, including the nicest mad bikers you'll meet in a month of Sundays and a nightmarish vision of a paedophile predator. The timing of Kitano's editing is once again frame-perfect, and usually calibrated for maximum comic effect.

Dolls is the most stylised of the trio, presenting three occasionally intersecting but essentially separate stories that feature recurring themes of thwarted love and personal tragedy. In two cases, the male half of a couple takes a decision that potentially (and in one case actually) has ruinous consequences for his happiness, material benefits notwithstanding, while in the third a badly disfigured pop star finally meets her most ardent fan. It's extraordinarily beautiful to look at (the treatment of the seasons being particularly striking, as are Yamamoto Yohji's costumes), with the opening puppet performance both establishing the meticulously controlled *mise en scène* (the film's intense emotional content

needs to be teased out by the viewer) and doubling as a tribute to Kitano's grandmother, a narrator of *banraku* puppet theatre.

Disc: Sourced from Office Kitano's own high-definition masters, these look superb on Blu-ray, with the more colourful *Dolls* being the standout. Each disc has some solid extras, including multiple interviews and Makoto Shimozaki's feature-length behind-the-scenes *Jam Session: Official Bootleg of Kikujirō*.

MICHAEL COLLINS

Neil Jordan; UK/Ireland/USA 1996; Warner/Region B
Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD; Certificate 15, 132 minutes; 1.85:1; Features: Neil Jordan introduction and commentary, 1996 'South Bank Show' documentary, deleted scenes, trailer

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

It's surely no coincidence that this '20th anniversary edition', marking a first appearance on Blu-ray for Neil Jordan's epic of Irish nationhood, is hitting the shelves just before the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, somehow appropriate for a piece that's as much national monument as mere movie. Two decades on from its acrimonious initial release, now that such heated issues as the state of the Northern Ireland peace process, the film's historical accuracy and Julia Roberts's Irish accent have all cooled down a little, it's easier to appreciate the sheer daring of Jordan's conception and execution.

Indeed, while accepting the validity of the nationalist cause, this is no republican flag-waver. Instead, as per Jordan's description of it as a gangster film, it's a bracing exploration of political violence, and how immediate gains come at a terrible human cost and bring a corrosive moral legacy – all unfolding within the complex historical realities of Ireland's rocky transition to independence.

Quite a feat of exposition, then, especially in the barrelling first hour, where Liam Neeson's driven, ruthless Collins lays out the template for a modern terror campaign, before the more reflective second half shows the rebels turning the guns on each other in a bitter and wrenching civil conflict. The courtly romantic subplot gets a little overwhelmed, so muscular is the rest of the film, which now looks like a precious relic of a particular celluloid moment. A time when Hollywood coin funded a grown-up portrayal of guerrilla insurgency – which would have been so much more troubling in the changed post-9/11



A touch of minx: *Pink String and Sealing Wax*

environment – and thousands of extras swarmed over Dublin in a last hurrah for pre-CGI spectacle.

Disc: A newly recorded commentary, wherein Jordan lucidly explains what is true to the facts (the love triangle actually happened) and where he deviated from them (putting an armoured car on the Croke Park turf), makes this new edition a worthwhile upgrade, though you need the Blu-ray to do full justice to Chris Menges's subtle lighting.

PETER DE ROME: GRANDFATHER OF GAY PORN

Ethan Reid; UK 2014; Peccadillo Pictures/Region 2 DVD; Certificate 18, 97 minutes; 1.85:1; Features: deleted scene, audio interviews

Reviewed by Alex Davidson

Ethan Reid's hugely enjoyable documentary explores the life of Peter de Rome, a filmmaker who made a host of artistic gay erotica on 8mm in the 1970s. De Rome retired from porn in the 1980s, but his films were rediscovered by the BFI, preserved in the National Archive and released on DVD.

De Rome's camera captures a world long lost, post-Stonewall and pre-Aids, when gay porn became relatively mainstream – though few erotic films were as ambitious as De Rome's works, as evidenced by his crazed masterpiece *The Destroying Angel* (1976), a wild mix of gay sex and hallucinogenic horror.

Filed not long before his death in 2014, de Rome proves a superb interview subject here, a witty and charming octogenarian utterly comfortable talking graphically about filming sex scenes. Reid's documentary also boasts some excellent talking heads, including Wakefield Poole, director of *Boys in the Sand* (1971), perhaps the most famous gay porn film ever made, and comedian and fan Julian Clary. Fun facts pepper the narrative – unlikely celebrities wrote scripts for de Rome's erotica; Greta Garbo unwittingly made her swansong in one of his last films.

Disc: Deleted scenes and audio interviews.

PINK STRING AND SEALING WAX

Robert Hamer; UK 1948; StudioCanal/Region B
Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD; Certificate U; 89 minutes; 1.37:1; Features: Joanna McCallum and Melanie Williams interviews, gallery, restoration comparison

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

If Britain was feeling good about itself after emerging victorious from World War II, December 1945 saw the release of this devastating portrait of the destructive power of moral certainty, as played out in a grisly Victorian murder story.

Googie Withers is on startlingly minxy form as the Brighton port landlady whose lot would be vastly improved if only her boozing, bullying husband were out of the way. But the real monster here is august pharmacist Mervyn Johns, a true pillar of the community, whose unyielding self-righteousness is relentlessly suffocating the hopes and dreams of his wife and children. When we first see him, he's in his shop, sealing the wax on a prescription package tied with pink string, a keen visual metaphor for the drama of entrapment and would-be release to follow.

Ill-fated maverick Robert Hamer's first feature has understandably been

New releases

overshadowed by the titles that came directly afterwards, *It Always Rains on Sunday* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. But if it is superficially less demonstrative than their respective noir melodrama and absurdist farce, its subtle precision makes it more than worthy of comparison. Whether it's embittered sarcasm or palpable erotic longing, Hamer has a way of bringing out the salient feeling in each scene, without recourse to overemphasis, building up a cumulative, aching empathy for characters (women mostly) who lack the leverage to change their own unrewarding lives. He even makes the boxy confines of Ealing's studio space work in his favour, with overstuffed Victorian interiors leaving little room for manoeuvre and enveloping claustrophobia finally giving way to a climactic, complexly expressive tracking shot that's surely one of the most thrilling camera moves in all of British cinema.

Disc: On Blu-ray, the new transfer brings out all the brocaded textures of the Victorian dresses and furnishings, while brief interviews with Goggie Withers's daughter Joanna McCallum and film academic Melanie Williams usefully explore women's roles in the Ealing filmography.

PRESSURE POINT

Hubert Cornfield, USA 1962, Olive Films/Region A/1 Blu-ray/DVD: 88 minutes, 1.66:1

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

Even if you wanted to launch a Hubert Cornfield revival, there are scarcely enough movies to build one around, and the shooting of *Pressure Point* had something to do with this – it was purportedly a falling-out with its producer Stanley Kramer that more or less permanently sidetracked Cornfield's career. Cornfield is known by aficionados for a handful of crime/thriller movies that he injected with visual dynamism and Wellesian razzle-dazzle: 1957's *Plunder Road*, 1960's *The 3rd Voice* and 1968's superlative *The Night of the Following Day* (the first two of which were shot by the gifted cinematographer Ernest Haller, who also did the stark black-and-white *Pressure Point*).

Cornfield's last movie in Hollywood, *Pressure Point* is squarely situated in the Kramer 'social-problem picture' mode, though at times it is closer to the fantasia of *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T* than *The Defiant Ones*. The story, co-written by Cornfield, depicts the treatment of a jailed white American Nazi (Bobby Darin) by a black prison psychiatrist (Sidney Poitier), but escapes the confines of the shrink's cramped office through flashbacks, some of which depict the patient's psyche as a kind of black-box theatre wherein scenes of his primal trauma are replayed.

Cornfield came from a graphics background, having first worked as a poster designer in the European offices of Twentieth Century-Fox. This is evident in the film's cut-rate Saul Bass titles and the integration of various geometric motifs into the visuals, including the remembrance of a violent juke-joint bust-up that ends with every square inch of the place painted with tie-tac toe grids. Rather elementary psychology is driven home with sledgehammer associative cutting – from a violent fantasy about the patient's mother to the alcoholic father tenderising meat, from a mezuzah on the doorframe of a spurning lover



Scenes from a movie marriage: *Shooting Stars*

to a swastika flag – but Poitier and surly, potato-faced Darin underplay coyly, and Cornfield and Haller discover a few truly striking images. Like Cornfield's career as a whole, *Pressure Point* is slightly longer on promise than payoff – but how many directors even manage that?

Disc: No cause for complaint at this undersexed package by Olive, who released Cornfield's corker of a heist movie *Plunder Road* in 2013.

SHOOTING STARS

Anthony Asquith, UK 1928, BFI/Region B

Blu-ray/Region 2 DVD, 103 minutes, 1.33:1

Features: booklet, archive films and materials, score

Reviewed by Pamela Hutchinson

Anthony Asquith cut his teeth, and sharpened his claws, on this comedy drama set in an ersatz version of the British film industry. Annette Benson and Brian Aherne are husband-and-wife movie stars Mae Feather and Julian Gordon, whose romance is strictly for the cameras. Donald Calhoun is the slapstick artist who is carrying on a steamy affair with Mae. Disaster looms, and the film soon tips from movie-biz send-up to a high-stakes drama that loads the title's double entendre with lethal meaning.

The joys of *Shooting Stars* are twofold. First, it's an accomplished debut from Asquith: gorgeously, ambitiously shot from the off and climaxing with an unforgettable two-part showdown on two separate studio stages. Second, it's a treat for history buffs, offering a glimpse, albeit a cheeky one, of the British film industry a century ago.

This long-awaited restoration of *Shooting Stars* brings out the beauty of its handsome cast and photography, doing justice to its chiaroscuro finale. The film is also paired with an excellent new score from John Altman; *Shooting Stars* has more music cues than most silents, plus abrupt shifts in tone, but this jazzy, sophisticated score takes them in its swaggering stride.

The film is presented with supporting material from the BFI archives, including many scenes that seem to have hopped out of the feature. Studio footage shows the business of making a silent movie, from the scale and bustle of the sets to the preening stars. Film of American child star Jackie Coogan bringing Stoll Pictures to a standstill on a publicity visit supports Asquith's hint that his home film industry was in thrall to Hollywood, in the cutest possible way. Clips from movie talent

contests show the screen debut of Sybil Rhoda (who took a small part in Hitchcock's *Downhill*) as well as scenes of Norma and Constance Talmadge choosing a co-star for Buster Keaton in *Three Ages*.

Disc: As well as the archive films, extras include essays by John Altman, Bryony Dixon, Henry K. Miller and Chris O'Rourke.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Vera Chytilová, Czechoslovakia 1963, Second Run/

Region 0 DVD: 81 minutes, Certificate PG, 1.37:1

Features: 'A Bagful of Fleas' (43 minutes), booklet

Reviewed by Michael Brooke

Second Run's admirably comprehensive trawl through the endlessly surprising back catalogue of Czech proto-feminist maverick Vera Chytilová completes their survey of her 1960s work with her debut feature *Something Different* (1963) and the medium-length *A Bagful of Fleas* (1962), which she made after her FAMU graduation film *Ceiling* (1961, an extra on Second Run's *The Fruit of Paradise* DVD). That early film was almost a psychological self-portrait, a study of a bored and unfulfilled model (Chytilová had been one herself) constantly manipulated by the men in both her professional and personal spheres, and Chytilová's next two films showed a similarly in-depth (and, in a local context, largely unprecedented) concern for the lives of women in early 1960s Czechoslovakia.

The exhilarating, splendidly titled *A Bagful of Fleas* (could any metaphor be more apt?) is notionally a pre-planned dramatic narrative, but it was mostly filmed in a hostel for female factory workers with an entirely non-professional cast essentially playing themselves. The subtitles do a heroic job of keeping up with their non-stop chatter and fourth-wall-breaking asides to the camera, their evident awareness of its presence clearly spurring them on. 'Girls, show some discipline!' beseeches their would-be dictatorial supervisor, but there's no suppressing these bundles of energy as they breach their curfew, fantasise about living in an American western or jump from the wardrobe using an umbrella as a parachute (an image that anticipates Chytilová's more overtly surrealist films).

Something Different comprises two parallel stories about ostensibly different women, one a housewife played by Chytilová's close friend Vera Uzelacová, the other the gymnast Eva Bosáková, a real-life Olympic gold medalist. They never meet, but Chytilová's intercutting draws regular parallels between their daily routines (Vera's flat-cleaning and child-negotiating seem just as physically and mentally demanding as Eva's training sessions) and their relationships with the principal men in their lives (respectively, a frequently absent husband, all too present trainer and, in Vera's case, a clandestine lover). Visibly growing in confidence, Chytilová demonstrates a remarkable facility for conveying her subjects' inner lives purely from the way they silently interact with their surroundings, pausing wistfully by a window or taking an apprehensive breath before a physically challenging somersault.

Disc: The recently restored *A Bagful of Fleas* looks startlingly good, although *Something Different* is also highly watchable. The comprehensive booklet essay is by the ever-reliable Peter Hames. ●

Television

THE CHILDREN OF GREEN KNOWE

Colin Cant; UK 1986; BBC/Simply Media/Region 2
DVD: Certificate U; 100 minutes; 1.33:1

Reviewed by Robert Hanks

At school we were taught that every drama needs conflict, but this adaptation of Lucy M. Boston's classic novel, about a small boy visiting an old house and meeting the shades of his ancestors, floats along on pure charm and strangeness. The opening scenes of a waterlogged fenland, in particular, are beautifully eerie – I wondered if Miyazaki might have seen this before he came up with the drowned landscape of *Spirited Away*. Alec Christie brings an elfin, otherworldly quality to Tolly, the hero: the idea that he would find ghosts congenial playmates seems entirely plausible.

In theory, this is aimed at a pre-teen audience, but the underlying proposition, that the *unheimlich* might seem more like home than any of the other options, feels very unchildish. **Disc:** Perfectly fine.

COPENHAGEN

Howard Davies; UK 2002; BBC/Dazzler/
Region 2 DVD; Certificate PG; 90 minutes; 1.77:1

Reviewed by Robert Hanks

Michael Frayn's 1998 stage play, about the disputed events of a 1941 meeting between Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, dazzled audiences and critics with its grasp of complex physics and its proposed analogy between the uncertainties of the quantum world and the unfathomability of human motives. The screen version, by the distinguished stage director Howard Davies, has a terrific cast (Stephen Rea as Bohr, pre-Bond Daniel Craig as Heisenberg, Francesca Annis as Bohr's wife Margrethe), and the trimming of the action into Copenhagen locations are done with intelligence, but it has a deadening reverential quality – the sepia colours, low lighting levels and perpetual solemn music nag the viewer to take it all seriously; Frayn's wit struggles to make itself felt. It's quality TV all right, but that isn't necessarily the same as being good. **Disc:** Good, crisp transfer.

DOOMWATCH

UK 1970-72; BBC/Simply Media/Region 2 DVD; Certificate 15; 10:30 minutes; 1.33:1. Features: 'The Cult of Doomwatch'

Reviewed by Robert Hanks

The BBC's uneven stewardship of its back catalogue has had the perverse consequence of magnifying the reputation of some of its programmes. *Doomwatch* was a hit when it was first broadcast – I have met women who still swoon, more than 40 years on, over Robert Powell's impossibly slender and glamorous scientist Toby Wren – but its mystique owes a good deal to its subsequent elusiveness: episodes wiped (of course), no terrestrial reruns, a feeble VHS release in 1990... It takes less than that to turn a science-fiction programme into a cult.

This release finally collects what is left of the series – two thirds of the original programmes, including the entire second season and the previously unbroadcast 'Sex and Violence', withdrawn less for reasons of taste than because the prudish campaigners



Doomwatch Aspects of the series creak disturbingly, but its straight-faced commitment to its plots and the cast's zeal contribute to an often gripping atmosphere

portrayed were too obviously drawn from Mrs Mary Whitehouse and her colleagues. Now we can see what an extraordinary blend of brilliance and tat *Doomwatch* was.

It is set in the Department of Measurement of Scientific Work – the meaningless name is a nice bureaucratic touch – a quasi-independent government body with the vaguely defined task of monitoring dangers to the public from technological development. 'Doomwatch' is either the codename for the department or the nickname of its supposedly advanced computer ('a digital-analogue hybrid,' boasts technician Colin Bradley, unhelpfully), which crunches vast quantities of data and throws up plot-generating patterns – surges in cigarette-buying by women in London, or cockfighting in Wales. When this happens, Dr Spencer Quist (John Paul), the Nobel Prize-winning head of the department, comes over all brusque and speculates on a possible grave threat to the public, before getting into an argument with his Whitehall superiors, who want to keep a lid on it. His deputy, scientist-spook-Iothario Dr John Ridge (Simon Oates), goes off to visit factories and laboratories under an ill-supported alias, and Wren conducts experiments while looking agonised and handsome; both model improbable 70s fashions, including unhealthy quantities of cravats.

The myth of *Doomwatch* holds that it was astonishingly prophetic about the dangers of technology. There is some truth in this – the

hormones leaking out of fish farms in 'The Battery People' is a good example – but like most prophecies, the ones here work best with elastic interpretation and not too much attention to detail. Where the show was ahead of its time was in its anxiety about the environment, its sense that our technical capacities might outpace or even erode morality. This was the era of apocalypse – *Doomwatch* sits halfway between *The War Game* (1965) and *Survivors* (1975), though the best episodes are compelling because the dangers are insidious enough to pass unnoticed. The most immediate real-world precedent for Quist's work, perhaps, was the thalidomide scandal, which the *Sunday Times* had campaigned about only a couple of years earlier.

Aspects of the series creak disturbingly, or comically: though the second and third seasons gave prominent regular roles to Jean Trend and Elizabeth Weaver, the scripts had an unfortunate tendency to patronise or punish women; dialogue can be perfunctory, special effects risible – the supposedly deadly stuffed rats in the episode 'Tomorrow, the Rat' are particularly memorable. But its straight-faced commitment to its plots and the zeal of the cast contribute to an often gripping atmosphere; irony can't get a foothold. And at times it is startlingly off-the-wall: 'Sex and Violence' is surely the only episode of popular TV in any country based on a reading of Wilhelm Reich's notion of sexual repression as a tool of tyranny.

Disc: Very good transfer, all things considered.

Books



Rainy night in Georgia: images from William Cameron Menzies's detailed storyboard for *Gone with the Wind* (1939)

JACK OF ALL TRADES

WILLIAM CAMERON MENZIES

The Shape of Films to Come

By James Curtis, Pantheon Books, 432pp, £28, ISBN 9780375424724

Reviewed by Christopher Frayling

In 1979, Orson Welles wrote to the curators of the pioneering Thames Television-sponsored exhibition at the Victoria & Albert museum in London, 'The Art of Hollywood: Fifty Years of Art Direction'. He declined their invitation to provide the foreword to the accompanying catalogue, but in his letter he added, "Menzies is the only name on your list I could enthuse over. You should realise that in Hollywood, until the collapse of the studio system, the head of the Art Department was essentially a bureaucratic functionary and did little or none of the actual designing for which he took credit and received awards..."

One of the themes of the exhibition was indeed the role of the supervising art directors – the design managers, in today's terms – who helped

to oversee the distinctive 'looks' of the major studios, as forms of product differentiation or corporate branding: Cedric Gibbons at MGM, Hans Dreier at Paramount, Anton Grot at Warner Bros, Richard Day at 20th-Century Fox, and so on. Another theme was the relative neglect by film historians and critics – many of them graduates in history or literature – of the visual aspects of filmmaking, and in particular of the key role of the art director and production designer. And throughout, the exhibition asked: "What did/does the art director do?", "What did/does the production designer do?" and "What is the difference between their roles?" Directors, producers and writers tended by then to be treated as the established 'authors' of Hollywood cinema – and everyone understood what acting involved – but what of those whose names were lower down the credits, the people of whom Michael Powell was shortly and provocatively to write, "The most genuinely creative members of a film unit, if the author of the original story and screenplay is excluded, is the art director... In the film world, the producer and director and cameraman are so full of themselves that it is not sufficiently acknowledged that the

art director is the creator of those miraculous images up there on the big screen."

The V&A exhibition was preceded in May to September 1978 by 'Designed for Film: the Hollywood Art Director' at New York's Museum of Modern Art, which covered similar ground with more of an emphasis on up-to-date case studies. It looked as though curators, researchers, critics and historians were at last beginning to take art directors and production designers seriously – not to install these professionals as this week's auteur, but to understand their contribution to the core team of director, producer, writer and cinematographer. Since then, there have been numerous picture books, interviews, general surveys, and studies of painting and film and of the contribution of sets to film narrative – but very few fully fledged biographies.

Now, following my work on Ken Adam, and Ian Christie's on John Box, James Curtis has published the most extensive biography yet of William Cameron Menzies (pronounced 'Mingies'), who was unusual among senior Hollywood art directors for a number of reasons, as this book points out: he never wanted to become a supervising art director because he loved doing

the job rather than sitting behind a desk and talking about it; he liked to work freelance for assorted studios, on short-term contracts, rather than being tied exclusively to one; he trained as an illustrator at the Art Students League of New York (after just one year studying architecture at Yale); in 1929 he won the first-ever Academy Award for Best Art Direction, for two films he had actually designed – *The Dove* and *Tempest*; he was the first to be credited as 'production designer' because in the case of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) it was his storyboards, colour sketches and shot sequences, and his second-unit direction for some 33 out of 137 shooting days, which gave the film its visual coherence; and he made the transition from art director to director – like Alfred Hitchcock and Paul Leni – bringing with him a strong appreciation of the value of pre-production storyboarding, sequencing and design. Indeed, he has a good claim to have been the inventor of the storyboard, or continuity sketch, in its modern sense – not just for budgetary reasons (though that was a big part of it), but to present completely cinematic ideas through pre-visualisation. He had a deep understanding of kinetic design and, importantly, of the practicalities of studio filmmaking: his ambition for the medium, he often said, was for it to develop a language of its own, rather than relying on the conventions of the theatre, literature and fine art. In a lecture on 'Pictorial Beauty', given at the University of Southern California in April 1929, he concluded that his role combined visual flair with historical and technical knowledge, the ability to "picturize" the most mundane settings and to sacrifice architectural authenticity "for the sake of emotional response", and that he had to be "a landscape painter, a dramatist, an inventor, a historical and now an acoustical expert – in fact, a jack of all trades". As Curtis observes, the *dramatist* was among the most important for Menzies, as a visual storyteller through graphic images who – for better or worse – sometimes included actors among the graphics.

The book begins in December 1938 with the burning of Atlanta for *Gone with the Wind*, then flashes back to Menzies's early life and career, as the son of first-generation immigrants from Scotland. Anton Grot introduced him to filmmaking (from advertising) in New York, and he then moved to Hollywood – on the coattails of director Raoul Walsh – in 1921. After adopting the middle name 'Cameron' – which he hoped would attract a bit of attention on the credits – he developed a reputation in the industry for his innovative designs and his conscientiousness, working with Mary Pickford (*Rosita*, 1923), Douglas Fairbanks (*The Thief of Bagdad*, 1924), Rudolph Valentino (*The Eagle*, 1925, and *Son of the Sheik*, 1926), John Barrymore (*The Beloved Rogue*, 1927), Norma Talmadge (*The Dove*, 1928) and other top-liners. His early efforts as co-director (always with someone who could work with actors) from 1931–34 managed to lose one studio – Fox – about a quarter of a million dollars. Even *Things to Come* (1936), his first solo effort, lost money and proved conclusively that he saw actors more as graphic elements than as



Things to Come (1936)

fellow artists, and seemed incapable of extracting a performance from them. After *Gone with the Wind*, he worked for various studios with director Sam Wood (notably *Our Town*, 1940, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1943), whose plodding style was considerably enriched by Menzies's visual imagination. The 1950s saw him demoted to much lower budgets – directing a pilot for a Fu Manchu television series (1952) and *Invaders from Mars* (1953), now a cult classic with TV-

William Cameron Menzies had a deep understanding of kinetic design and, importantly, of the practicalities of studio filmmaking

watching baby-boomers – and his farewell to the industry involved him being driven to distraction by Mike Todd as 'associate producer' on the huge *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956).

There is much fascinating detail on the exact role of the art director and production designer in the making of some key films, on production politics and on Menzies's favourite motifs, such as sloping picket fences and open umbrellas. There are some surprises: among them Menzies's unsung contributions to De Mille's *Cleopatra* (1934), Josef von Sternberg's abortive *I, Claudius* (1937), Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and *Spellbound* (1945), and Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947), and the fact that Menzies was credited as 'production designer' on two Selznick films released before *Gone with the Wind*. Curtis has made thorough use of the Menzies family collection of papers, paintings, drawings and shot sequences – essential sources, given the way in which the studios junked the back numbers in the 1960s – though most of the book is about the professional rather than the private life. Menzies emerges as a hard-working, hard-drinking man (he had a famous auto accident while under the influence), often stressed by the pressure of having to produce 500 to 800 drawings per film, neglectful of domestic life, indecisive about his various career moves, and – latterly – dreaming about opening a pub in the home counties of England, which might not have been such a clever idea. He was known by his colleagues as "two-drink Menzies", because although he was an alcoholic he had a physical intolerance of hard liquor.

The Orson Welles letter of 1979 is cited by Curtis as a very belated epitaph of sorts. When William Cameron Menzies died, in March 1957, of a heart attack following cancer of the mouth, not a single film journal or magazine noted his passing. ☹



Going back to the drawing board: William Cameron Menzies

BASQUE CINEMA

A Cultural and Political History

Rob Stone and María Pilar Rodríguez, I.B. Tauris, 272pp, £64, hardback, ISBN 9781780769820

Reviewed by María Delgado

The political scientist Georg Sørensen's ideas concerning communities both of citizens and sentiments, and the ways in which they relate to cinema within and beyond the nation state, prove a useful way for Rob Stone and María Pilar Rodríguez to organise the trends, motifs and structures that have underpinned and promoted Basque cinema over the past century. This excellent study is aware of the problems of historicising a cinema that has largely been viewed through a few select films – such as Néstor Basterretxea and Fernando Larruquet's *Mother Earth* (*Ama Lur*, 1968), Imanol Uribe's *The Burgos Trial* (*El proceso de Burgos*, 1979), Julio Medem's *Vacas* (1992) and Jon Garano and Jose Mari Goenaga's *For 80 Days* (*80 egunear*, 2010). Here the focus is instead on mapping the structures that have produced and distributed these films, as well as their impact on the wider Spanish, European and international landscapes of film exhibition.

Historical concerns are given due attention with coverage of the origins of Basque cinema, showing how the moral structure of melodrama has been used as a way to bind citizens together through what the authors term a "unifying

sentiment". Lurid plotlines featuring hurried reversals of fortune, deathbed reunions, fast cars and stowaways are key components of films that challenge the pace of life introduced by 20th-century technology and the consequent threat this was thought to pose to Basque virtues. A discussion of ethnographic films also allows the authors to show how Basque identity on screen has been defined by a particular ideology that is easily recognisable through dance, sports and local costumes. Tropes that recur in 21st-century Basque cinema are traced to its origins 80 years earlier.

San Sebastián's international film festival is viewed both as a showcase for Basque cinema, and a way of understanding how regional identity functioned under the centralist dictatorship of Francisco Franco. The festival evolved, after 1975, into a space for what the authors term "the Basque cinema of radical sentiment" – articulating an ideological position that sympathised with the cause of the armed Basque separatist group ETA. The authors map the festival's evolution into the 21st century across expanded sections while acknowledging the ways in which its concerns for Basque cinema remain firmly in place.

Certain films are beautifully reread – as with *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, 1973). Here its position as a quintessential Spanish feature is unsettled by a focus on local references. Diverse waves of Basque cinema are analysed in different chapters, including heritage cinema, representations of terrorism, the auteurist works of Medem, Juanma Bajo Ulloa and Daniel Calparsoro in the early



Julio Medem's *Vacas*

1990s, and diasporic films. The influence of the government-funded Kimuak short film production scheme is situated within a wider history of shorts in Basque cinema – cinematic forms that are too often relegated to footnotes are here effectively presented centre-stage.

There are no easy answers as to how the Basque is identified, as the treatment of *Spanish Affair* (*Ocho apellidos vascos*, 2014), the most commercially successful Spanish film to date, expertly shows. This culture clash romcom pits an Andalusian Romeo against a Basque Juliet, parodying restrictive definitions of Basqueness as well as the wider politics and performance of nationalism in contemporary Spain. In fact, the nuanced and complex history that Stone and Rodríguez construct recognises that "perhaps the most enduring signifier of Basque cinema is this eternal questioning of its definition".

BETTER LIVING THROUGH CRITICISM

How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty and Truth

By A.O. Scott, Jonathan Cape, 288pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781594204838

Reviewed by Nick James

To review a book about the nature of criticism – not just film criticism, but all kinds – presents a problem of the kind that A.O. Scott's book loves to parse. The dualistic nature of the critic's position, as Scott sees it, is in the shadow between inspiration and disappointment, subject and object, authoritative and populist and other opposites. Critiquing a critic on the subject of a shared trade only compounds the issue of where to stand, especially if you've met and like the author, which I have and do.

So I'll plump for description first. To begin with, there's the knowingly dualistic conceit of the book's self-help-like title, which leaves a sincere belief in the life-enhancing properties of thinking about culture with a distancing metropolitan wit. It's like a signpost that says, "You're going to enjoy this because – even if we take in Eliot, Kant, Rilke, Boileau and the like – we're not going to make you work too hard." And the book goes on to treat its subject very seriously while never losing its need to remain on an accessible, easy-to-read, let-me-hold-your-hand-through-this basis.

The book has six chapters interspersed with four dialogues Scott has with himself. In his introductory dialogue he recalls Samuel L. Jackson ticking him off for his belittling review of *The Avengers*, and argues that thinking is where criticism begins and we're all guilty of it. His first

chapter 'The Critic as Artist and Vice Versa' is very good on how essential critical processes are to artists themselves. It talks of criticism as art's "late-born twin" and touches on Godard's fusing of the two practices. 'The Eye of the Beholder' is about taste, and brings in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Marina Abramovic's *The Artist Is Present* in an apt, if slightly glib, postmodern comparison. A second dialogue contains the first of several self-critiques that point to the book's weaknesses, "Once again you are spewing questions instead of answering mine," he says to himself.

The book treats its subject very seriously while never losing its need to remain on a let-me-hold-your-hand-through-this basis



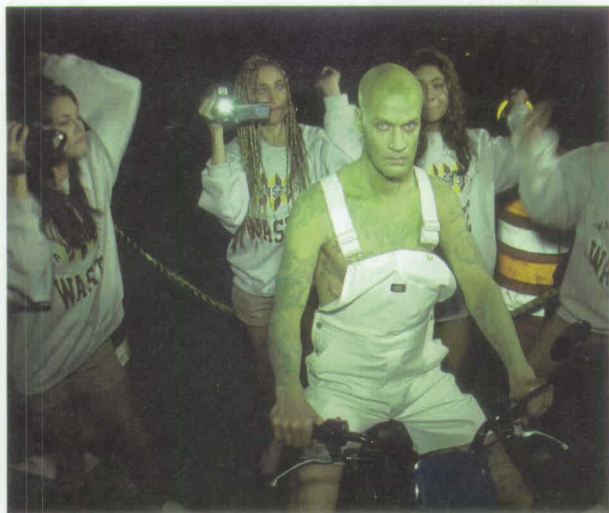
Samuel L. Jackson in *The Avengers*

In 'Lost in the Museum', the weakest chapter, the questions pile high. Scott tackles canons and the culture wars, arguing that culture is now defined by its relationship to consumption and presuming that present popularity as measured by online distributors will now replace critical posterity.

By the time I got to 'The Trouble with Critics', I was tiring of Scott's genius for explaining the dichotomies inherent in the obvious – aka telling us what we already know. The third dialogue – dealing with personality in general and Scott's own with excusable coyness – came therefore as a welcome break. Then, in the penultimate chapter, 'How to Be Wrong', some unequivocal opinions can be found, although not before another nudge of self-critique: "Nor do I want to slide into facile, lukewarm relativism," Scott writes, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, in a book so relativist it could make you yearn for Allan Bloom's jeremiad *The Closing of the American Mind*.

Never mind. I love Scott's characterisation of criticism as "a compendium of error and misdirection". It's in his gauging of the importance of the form/content divide that we at last experience some 'passion' (a word Scott feels is now a synonym for 'ambition'). That divide is a "mistake with enormous and productive consequences in the history not only of criticism but of art as well". He also declares that "criticism, broadly and properly understood, can be the engine, not only of aesthetic reassessment, but also of social change".

Better Living Through Criticism is, in short, both the most important and the most annoying book on the topic I've read in years. Scott could not have picked a better time to highlight the usefulness of criticism than this moment, when its public stock is so low, and what more could you want from a book about criticism than to be irritated?



Candid camera: Ryan Trecartin's *Center Jenny* (2013)

MASS EFFECT

Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter, MIT Press, 528pp, £30.95, ISBN 9780262029261

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

I doubt that I can be the only film writer who sometimes has a sneaking suspicion that the real story of the day is going on somewhere else. For while cinephile culture dedicates itself to re-enacting 60-year-old battles over narratives of taste, and the Golden Age of Television continues to provide ready content-fodder, just maybe the actual breaking news has to do with the delivery system for most of our contemporary media. This is the almighty internet – “all around us, an indescribable feeling, soaring, tumbling, free-wheeling, through an endless diamond sky” as one excerpted passage in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* has it, the sort of rhapsodic language you might find in certain film writing of a century ago, though no one would dare go so over the top today.

More's the pity then that there hasn't been much discourse to date between the cinephile world and the community surrounding the making of and discussion about web-based art, save in the lowbrow form of the Internet Cat Video Festival, or at certain experimental film venues: Toronto's Images Fest, or the Brooklyn-based mini-cinema Light Industry, whose co-founder Ed Halter, with former Rhizome editor and New Museum curator Lauren Cornell, has compiled *Mass Effect*.

The result is an invaluable crash course in the major figures in net art and the “post-internet” present, with appearances from usual suspects such as Ryan Trecartin, Cory Arcangel and Seth Price, whose seminal essay ‘Dispersion’, an inquiry into the place of “internet as medium” in the “expanded sphere” of art, and the uneasy

relationship between online readymade and the gallery context, is reproduced here. (Given the frequency with which other pieces in *Mass Effect* refer to ‘Dispersion’, it's safe to say it's starting to acquire a ubiquity in writing about art in the Web 2.0 era of the kind formerly held by Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’.) In several enclosed pieces we find writers who, like the rest of us but more articulately, are struggling to take the measure of uncharted territory: Marisa Olson's ‘Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture’ draws an intriguing comparison between “pro surfers” – who arrange the results of their deep-dive excavations into the web – and “cinematic montage”. Gene McHugh, with his coinage of “the aesthetics of the surfuit”, encapsulates the “systems overload” principle of nothing succeeds like excess shared by a great deal of internet art. Mark Leckey's wild-eyed, gnostic ‘In the Long Tail’ is itself a performance piece, beginning with an abridged history of broadcasting before spiralling out into a sort of melic ode to the digital future. In addition to the writing about new media art compiled in *Mass Effect*, one piece in particular looks at the manner in which the web has changed art writing, helping to disperse a grammatically peculiar patois across the globe which didn't have a name until the appearance of Alix Rule and David Levine's hysterical essay ‘International Art English’.

As several essays in *Mass Effect* address the peculiar problems inherent in presenting web-based art in a gallery context – including Halter's own excellent ‘The Centaur and the Hummingbird’ – so too does the book wrestle with the difficulty of fitting the internet into a bound volume. Towards this end it is generously illustrated throughout with screen-grabs and images of installations at institutions, including Dallas's web-art-centric And/Or Gallery, and altogether makes for a handsome souvenir of the analogue era as we move up, up and away into the endless diamond sky. ☉

FACING BLACKNESS

Media and Minstrelsy in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*

By Ashley Clark, *The Critical Press*, 110pp, \$12, ISBN 9781941629215

Reviewed by Nelson Abbey

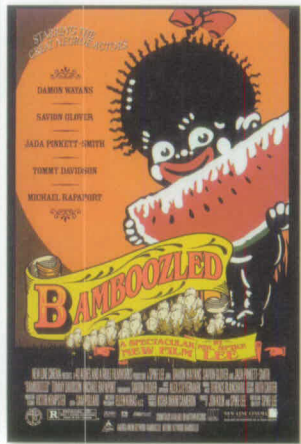
The debate surrounding black people in television and film tends to focus around two things: onscreen and behind-the-screen participation. But there is a further absolutely critical question which is rarely even considered: exactly what are “they” – black people – doing on and behind the screen?

Long before the hashtag-driven activism of the likes of #OscarsSoWhite, many of the questions surrounding the portrayal and employment of black people in film and TV were chronicled to great effect in Spike Lee's criminally underrated, underappreciated and misunderstood satire *Bamboozled* (2000).

Bamboozled is an acquired taste: when it came out it was misconstrued and critically panned. Ashley Clark's book helps readers better understand and appreciate the film by putting it in its proper context: providing an in-depth and thoughtful analysis of each of the major characters, breaking down much of what could easily be missed or misinterpreted, and explaining why such a brilliant film was shot on home-video grade cameras, a decision that can make it appear less than pretty to our spoilt-by-HD eyes.

But *Facing Blackness* is no hagiography and Clark is not afraid, for example, to highlight Lee's complicity in the extreme commodification of black culture, a feat the director poked fun at others for doing in *Bamboozled*.

Facing Blackness will hopefully help resurrect *Bamboozled* and afford it the credit it deserves, not only for chronicling history but also, in many instances, for its remarkable prescience. But perhaps most critically Clark's book encourages readers to better understand American popular cultural history through the prism of its first indigenous artform: minstrelsy. The book couldn't have arrived at a better time. Right now, it feels like a necessary read. ☉



FEEDBACK

READERS' LETTERS

Letters are welcome, and should be addressed to the Editor at *Sight & Sound*, BFI, 21 Stephen Street, London W1T 1LN Fax: 020 7436 2327 Email: S&S@bfi.org.uk

RICH PICKINGS

It is wonderful news that Nicolas Roeg's *Eureka* (1983) is finally being released in a prestige dual-format edition by, well, Eureka. While other 1980s Hollywood flops, such as *Scarface* (1983) and *The King of Comedy* (1983), have long been reassessed as classics of their era, Roeg's epic about the futility of greed still awaits rediscovery. *Sight & Sound*, to its credit, gave the film much attention at the time, and a few champions (critic Nigel Andrews, directors Danny Boyle and Bernard Rose) have enthusiastically beaten the drum since. But Roeg's admirers have had little chance to see it, and opinion is divided among those who finally tracked it down.

How did this happen? After *Heaven's Gate* (1980) the beleaguered MGM was in no mood for another controversial epic, and postponed the US release for two years. In the UK the distributor barely opened it, and for years an increasingly battered print did the rounds of arthouses, keeping the faith with those few who had caught the film on its original release. In 1989, it was screened in BBC's Film Club strand, and the creators were interviewed during the 15-minute introduction, which can be found on YouTube.

All of Roeg's key themes – the Double, No Man is an Island – come to a head in *Eureka*, with sly nods to *Citizen Kane* and Shakespeare's *Tempest*. The stars, Gene Hackman as the billionaire goldminer and Theresa Russell as his daughter, are at the top of their game, and the supporting cast boasts Roger Hauer, Joe Pesci, Mickey Rourke and Jane Lapotaine. *Don't Look Now* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* are outstanding films, but *Eureka* is Roeg's masterpiece. A goldmine, finally unearthed.

William Reiss London

(Editor's note: *Eureka* will be reviewed next month.)

PLOT HEAVY

It is ironic that your review of Luca Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash* (*S&S*, March) discussed the film solely in terms of its plot when, in the interview in the same issue, the director laments the unimaginative lexicon of technique used in recent films that inhabit a similar arthouse niche.

One of film's main advantages over television is its ability to stand outside story (or do away with it altogether). And one of the chief pleasures of *A Bigger Splash*, for me at least, was the technique and texture. Your reviews should acknowledge those qualities a bit more, given that they are a huge part of cinema.

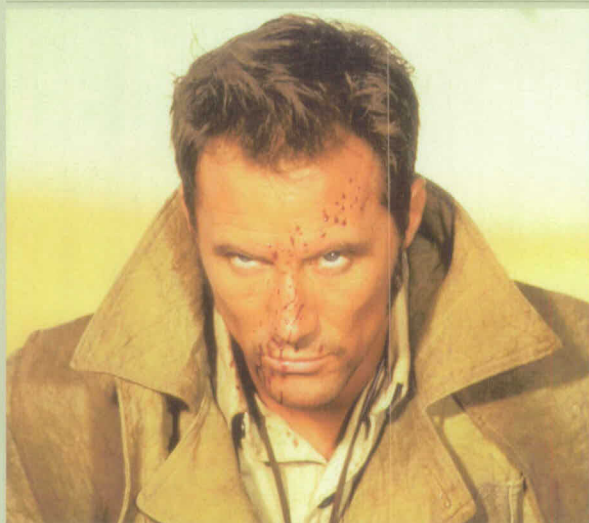
John Weddell Newcastle upon Tyne

IN MEMORIAM: ALEX PIRIE

Alex Pirie died at home in January. He is a presence in a number of the films of his wife Margaret Tait (1918-99 – see, for example, *Tail of*

A Bigger Splash

LETTER OF THE MONTH HIGH HOPES



Roger Luckhurst's piece on cinema adaptations of J.G. Ballard ('Maverick to mainstream', *S&S*, April) was enticing for its name-checking of missing projects, hopefully to be found in liminal spaces online, but there was little mention of Ballard's own intense love of cinema.

Ballard was thrilled to get *Crash* made even though, as Roger points out, Cronenberg's 1996 version feels like a timid betrayal of the book's subversive pleasures. In my

correspondence with Jim he described his delight at seeing Richard Stanley's desert horror story *Dust Devil* (1992, above), with its imagery seemingly lifted from the short-story collection *Vermilion Sands* (1971).

Perhaps after Ben Wheatley's flawed but brave film of *High-Rise* we'll see other maverick realisations of his work, including the unexpectedly joyful *The Unlimited Dream* Company (1979).

Christopher Fowler London

grace', *S&S*, June 2015) – glimpsed in *Rose Street* (1956), later talking with Hugh MacDiarmid in her film of the poet (1964), then helping rescue the harvest in the storm in *Land Makar* (1981). Her film *Where I Am Is Here* (1964) is among other things a love poem to cinema, a love poem to a place (Edinburgh) and a love poem to a person (Pirie). It also marked the point when they began moving to Orkney: for Kirkwall-born Margaret a return, for Edinburgh-born Alex a leaving.

When I visited him over several days last June he was as sharp and engaging as ever, again marvelling at what she had achieved in her films.

Peter Todd London

IN MEMORIAM: NICOLETTA MACHIAVELLI

Your list of film people who died in 2015 (*S&S*, March), omitted Nicoletta Machiavelli, in mostly Italian films in the 1960s and 70s, including spaghetti westerns such as *Navajo Joe* (1966), in which she was Burt Reynolds's love interest, and *Garter Colt* (1968). Her publicity said that she was a descendant of the Renaissance political thinker. She died in Seattle on 15 November 2015.

Michael Klossner By email

Additions and corrections

April p.16 In Jonathan Romney's round-up of this year's Berlin Film Festival, 'Telling tales', we inadvertently introduced an error in his top 10 list by naming the director of *A Quiet Passion* as Ulrich Seidl. It should, of course, have been Terence Davies. p.61 *Count, Certificate* PG, 1:55m 53s p.71 *The Club*, Certificate 18, 97m 18s p.83 *Next to Her*, Certificate 15, 80m 10s p.87 *The Pearl Button*, Certificate 12A, 81m 57s p.90 *Remember*, Certificate 15, 94m 22s p.90 *Rock the Kasbah*, Certificate 15, 100m 58s p.91 *Speed Sisters*, Certificate PG, 78m 10s p.93 *Welcome to Me*, Certificate 15, 86m 59s.

March p.99 In our review of *Offbeat*, we gave the aspect ratio as 1.33:1. It should have been 1.66:1. p.77 *Goodnight Mommy*, Certificate 15, 100m 10s **February** p.78 *Amis Little Girl Blue*, Certificate 15, 103m 30s **November 2015** p.88 In our review of *The Program*, we gave the aspect ratio as 1.85:1. It should have been 1.35:1.

ENDINGS...

UNDERGROUND



The close of Emir Kusturica's film was once read as a metaphor for Yugoslavia's break-up, but now looks like a far more personal statement

By Michael Brooke

When Emir Kusturica and Dusan Kovacevic began to adapt the latter's 1977 play *Spring in January* into the screenplay that ultimately became *Underground*, they were in no doubt about where their sprawling narrative would eventually end up. The beginning of the sequence is pure Lewis Carroll, as Blacky (Lazar Ristovsky) jumps down a well after being beckoned by the reflection of his long-drowned son Jovan (Srdan Todorovic). He finds himself swimming alongside the film's other characters (and some cows) towards a small peninsula, and as they clamber on to dry land they hear a fanfare heralding the start of 'Kalashnikov', a pile-driving brass-band ruckus that became such a huge signature hit for composer Goran Bregovic that it was even played in the interval of the Serbia-hosted Eurovision Song Contest in 2008.

The music, it turns out, is being played live at an alfresco wedding party attended by all the film's central characters, including ones who perished some time earlier. There's still visible tension between Blacky and Marko (Miki Manojlovic) – after all, they've spent the preceding half-century deceiving and double-crossing each other – but they too join the merrymaking with increasing gusto. A guest breaks the fourth wall to address us directly: "Here we built new houses with red roofs and chimneys where storks will nest, with wide-open doors for dear guests. We'll thank the soil for feeding us and the sun for

warming us and the fields for reminding us of the green grass of home. With pain, sorrow and joy, we shall remember our country, as we tell our children stories that start like fairytales.

'Once upon a time, there was a country...'

A more conventional filmmaker might have faded out at this verbal mixture of poetry and polemic, but Kusturica has one final visual firework to light, and it's just about the most memorable image in the entire film. With a barely audible crack that does nothing to quell the frenzied partying (there's no sign anybody has even noticed), the entire tip of the peninsula breaks off and floats off down the Danube, its human cargo seemingly oblivious to their fate as they're too busy having a good time to notice or care.

Kusturica's native Yugoslavia had already started fissuring in 1991 when Croatia and Slovenia declared independence, and by the time of *Underground*'s premiere in May 1995 Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia had followed suit, leaving just a rump comprising Serbia and Montenegro. Back then, it was assumed, reasonably, that the film's ending was simply a metaphor for the ongoing break-up, with a typically ambiguous message: after 50 years of conflict (which within the film itself might come in the form of the real thing or a propagandist reconstruction), the characters on screen have their own independent 'country', but it lacks any resources or infrastructure – indeed, it appears to

be at the mercy of outside forces in the form of the eddying Danube currents. And if the land mass is divided up per person, it amounts to little more than the sod of turf sported by a deluded would-be property magnate in Woody Allen's *Love and Death* (1975), and the effect is just as absurd. Or so it would seem from the context of the film.

But subsequent events have demonstrated that this ending isn't so much magical-realist fantasy as an early blueprint for the ambitious extra-cinematic projects that have taken up most of Kusturica's time over the past decade. In 2005, he constructed his own personal retreat in the form of the village of Drvengrad, whose German name Kustendorf literally means 'village on the coast', but could also mean 'Kusta's village'. It was built for the film *Life Is a Miracle* (2004), but left standing after shooting finished, and Kusturica announced that it would henceforth be his new home, adding "I lost my city during the war" (The city was Sarajevo, the 'loss' concerned its multicultural character prior to the 1990s). More recently, in 2012, he began building the town of Kamengrad (a self-describing translation is 'Stonetown'), inspired by Nobel laureate Ivo Andric's 1945 novel *The Bridge on the Drina*. Alongside the similarly large-scale and long-gestating visions of the late Aleksel German (*Hard to Be a God*, 2013) and Ilya Khrzhanovsky (the still uncompleted *Dan*, in production since 2006), this represents a desire to move beyond cinema fantasy into concrete reality, the filmmaker becoming architect of his own small but self-contained 'country' – and, in so doing, making his mark on more than the light of a projector beam. The ghosts of Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith must be cursing their lack of ambition. ●

The entire tip of the peninsula breaks off and floats off down the Danube, its human cargo seemingly oblivious to their fate

i *Underground* is out now on BFI DVD and Blu-ray